

## The Seimei Loom

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# The Seimei Loom

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## Summary

The early Edo period of Japan saw the Kiryuin family rise to great prominence in the recently-established Shogunate. But there were some that claimed that their influence derived not from shrewdness in politics, nor from courage on the field, but through the exercise of sorcery, and in particular use of a loom that would, it was said, weave whatever they desired, though it exacted a terrible price.

## 純潔 / Purity

*Her bracelets tinkle  
Her anklets clink  
She sways at her clattering loom  
She hurries to have a new  
Obi ready when he comes*

- Anonymous, *Manyōshū*

"This final exchange will settle things once and for all, Matoi!"

"All words and no action! You've grown soft, Kiryuin!"

*In the fiftieth year of the Edo period, that is around 1652 A.D. by the Western calendar, Matoi Ryuko – the only scion of Matoi Isshin, whose father had distinguished himself in the Battle of Sekigahara – issued challenge to the heir of the Kiryuin line, Kiryuin Satsuki, the duel to be conducted in the training halls of the Kiryuin's family estate just west of the capital.*

Sweat running into her eyes, her limbs aching, Matoi Ryuko adjusted her stance as across the dojo her opponent readied herself for another attack. The duel had already endured three, four times as long as either of them might have expected, but movement by movement, strike by strike, Kiryuin Satsuki's superior training was beginning to cede her the advantage. It was with good reason that the Kiryuin family had gained a fearsome reputation with the sword, one that had cost many a challenger their top-knot, if not something more substantial beneath it... But still, the Matoi's had a reputation of their own to uphold, and Ryuko had spent the past year immersed in her father's copy of the writings of Musashi, hoping that this would yield her an edge, or at least some element of unpredictability.

The early autumn winds buffeted the training hall, causing the panels to rattle in their frames, and as Ryuko glanced to the side, momentarily distracted, the young woman opposite her seized the moment to attack. Satsuki charged forward, her sword moving in a flowing, unpredictable arc, cutting off Ryuko's escape to both left and right. Blade clashed with blade repeatedly as Ryuko tried to stand her ground, hoping that the one-handed grip she had adopted in dutiful obeisance to Musashi would afford her more fluidity in her defense and ripostes. Satsuki pressed the attack, however, using every bit of extra reach and power that her height gave to her advantage, delivering blow after crushing blow from above and from the sides, intending to wear down Ryuko's defenses until an opening became apparent.

That extra reach, however, worked against her in this instance: as Ryuko retreated, hoping to gain more space to counterattack, Satsuki led slightly too forwards, away from her center where she could best control her balance and the blade. A slight turn of Ryuko's sword to the side deflected Satsuki's thrust, becoming leverage that opened her for a frontal attack. Ryuko needed no second opportunity – she launched at the older girl, hoping her advantage in speed would prove her opponent's undoing. Satsuki staggered backwards, her blade repeatedly

blocked from its wonted position. Her stance narrowed, losing her bedrock of stability: she staggered, a stumble or even a fall was a certainty at this point...

The stagger was a feint. As Ryuko drove at her, sensing victory, Satsuki dropped further to the side, rotating rapidly and then rising again, sword horizontal, to deliver a telling blow to Ryuko's head. She put all she had into the speed of the turn, the ferocity of the strike, and it was now Ryuko who was forced to drop and spin, the blade whistling fractionally above the most stubborn tuft of her deep black hair. Satsuki continued to follow through, readying herself for the next attack, but suddenly found herself yanked to the side, her momentum combined with an unexpected force throwing her hopelessly off-balance. As Ryuko had ducked and twisted, and Satsuki had passed over her, she had grabbed Satsuki's long, black hair, doubling it twice over in her balled fist and pulling hard. Ryuko came in under Satsuki's guard, beneath both outstretched arms, and swung fiercely at her waist, turning the blade at the very last moment so that the flat alone made contact with her abdomen.

There was a crack of splitting wood like a tree receiving a lightning strike: Satsuki was lifted into the air, sailing a full six feet backwards before crashing onto her back on the mats and driving up a cloud of dust. The motes danced mischievously in the golden sunlight as the hall became still. Ryuko looked down at her wooden *bokuto* – the blade was broken almost fully through, half-way up its length.

"Satsuki?"

The other girl slapped her free hand a few times against the tatami, to indicate she remained among the living. Her black hair spread out around her head like a fan.

"I'll grant you that one," Satsuki replied, coughing slightly. Her training armor had taken the worst of the impact, but that final strike had still knocked the wind out of her. Ryuko had improved measurably since their last bout.

Ryuko roared with laughter.

"Victory!!" She wagged the broken sword above her in a distinctly un-martial fashion.

"I do not recall the tenets of *Niten Ichi-ryu* saying anything about pulling your opponent's hair, a technique lacking any measure of decorum for a warrior of standing."

Ryuko pouted at her fallen adversary.

"Lady Sour Grapes just because you lost. Besides Musashi-sama would say..."

Satsuki groaned inwardly. Since Ryuko had found a copy of *Go Rin no Sho*, she had used Musashi's unorthodox style as justification for almost any affront to acceptable conduct or common decency. She raised her left arm in the air, and Ryuko wandered over to her.

"Niten Douraku," Satsuki countered, enunciating the master swordsman's Buddhist name with precision to emphasize her knowledge, "lived out his twilight years in ascetic seclusion in a cave, where he neither washed nor shaved. Which is where, I believe, the attraction lies for you."



Her outstretched arm was taken, but rather than help Satsuki to her feet, Ryuko gripped it firmly and then dropped herself down onto Satsuki's chest, pinning her upper arms beneath her knees. She wagged her eyebrows ominously.

"Now that I've vanquished their greatest samurai, I will claim my prize from the fair princess of the Kiryuin line! When I'm done, they won't be able to make a *miko* out of you!" She cackled in what she hoped was a menacing way, but her attempt at intimidation bore more relation to the caricatures of *rakugo* than it did to any documented tyrant. Nonetheless, Satsuki struggled beneath her. Normally to upend Ryuko, and pin her to the mat in her stead, would not have been a challenge, but Satsuki was still short of breath, and Ryuko was as immovable as the ancient stones in the Zen garden in the grounds of the dojo.

"Ryuko, if Hououmaru should catch us like this..." But Satsuki was reluctantly cognizant that rational arguments were rarely as effective against the other girl as force of arms.

"Fair maiden," Ryuko opened her eyes wide with intent, "I have bought the silence of your servants. None shall disturb us."

She began to lean down towards her prize, and Satsuki felt her heart thump against her armor, harder than it had done in the midst of battle.

"With what? Lemons?"

But Ryuko remained silent, the distance between them diminishing second by second, as inexorable as the rising tide. There was the smell of sweat, of the barley fields that Ryuko had crossed as she walked to the estate, and on top of that the subtle tang of citrus that always made Satsuki light-headed. They were close enough now that Satsuki could feel the premonition of the kiss on her lips, and she had to close her eyes as color spread across her cheeks. Swallowing hard, she breathed out and lay still.

Ryuko tutted disapprovingly and sat back on her haunches.

"You know," she said pointedly, "it's a lot less fun if you don't wriggle at least a little bit."

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When Satsuki had been six, almost seven years old, during the summer after her father's untimely death, she had been set to work in her rooms by her tutors. The relative pleasures of calligraphy and watercolors had passed, and she was now trapped in the doubly, triply accursed throes of *ikebana* - flower arrangement - apparently a fitting pastime for a young woman of rank. Kneeling at her desk she surveyed the creative output of the past hour: a slim, elegantly minimal vase into which she had placed two dead twigs. *Fuyu* - "Winter" - she'd titled it, hoping that her intransigent insistence of its merits would be sufficient to convince her aged tutor of its worth.

A bare stick remained unused, along with some strange seed-carrying pod that rattled when shaken like a child's toy and whose name she had already forgotten, and Satsuki was in the midst of considering their possible uses when she heard the shriek of splintering wood from

the grounds outside the wing. The sound was loud, but short-lived, immediately followed by the crash of objects unknown hitting the ground, and she wondered whether a joist in one of the outhouses had cracked, the roof partially collapsed into the storeroom beneath.

She slid open the panels, expecting at any moment to hear the commotion of the household staff, running to investigate and save anything of value. Across the veranda, the ornamental garden and a broad expanse of lawn, was the treasured peach tree that her ancestors had planted. It was still rocking slightly, leaves spiraling leisurely down, but on the ground beside it was a great bough, laden with fruit, its splintered end matching the gaping wound on the trunk. And rising from amidst the tangle of branches and bruised peaches was a child, a boy as far as Satsuki could see, his rough *yukata* packed overflowing with stolen fruit. He appeared little more than a street urchin, tufted black hair as unruly as its owner, arms and legs dotted with grazes and scabs from this and earlier misadventures. For a moment the two stared at each other, as the orphaned leaves continued to fall around him; a gentle breeze ruffled his hair almost imperceptibly, and then he span on his heels and made off at speed towards the high wall that surrounded the grounds.

Without a thought for her safety or the duties of her position, Satsuki snatched up her *bokuto* from where it rested in the corner of her room, and charged after the intruder. He was halfway up the wall by the time she caught up with him, but though he was out of her reach her sword was, relative to her height, as long as the *odachi* that the cavalry carried and it was easy to beat him about the legs and torso with it as he climbed. Under her merciless rain of blows his handhold gave way, and he toppled off the wall, landing on his side near her in an explosion of ripe fruit. Satsuki raised the sword above her head, preparing to administer a further beating, but the vagrant child leapt to his feet, knocking her to one side, and the pursuit began once again.

Thus it was that when the household finally responded to the shouts coming from the grounds, they discovered Satsuki, sword in hand, prowling the perimeter of the ornamental lake. There, in the center, waist-deep in water, was the interloper - belligerently chewing his way through his cache of half-crushed peaches. Around him, the koi moved in curious circles: black, white, red, blue, like oil paints mixed in with the water. Satsuki's mother, Lady Ragyo, appeared to find some amusement in the scene, murmuring something to herself in a foreign language that the others present found unintelligible, but Matoi Isshin, who'd been in council with her during this energetic diversion, was less amused, and Satsuki saw the blood rush to his face.

"Matoi Ryuko!!" he roared, striding into the lake completely heedless of the water and the damage he might do to his fine silk clothing. Isshin scooped up the boy, or girl as circumstances now revealed her to be, with one arm and carried her bodily back to the garden, unmoved by her shouts and the blows she was attempting to mete out to him. He bowed awkwardly to Ragyo and also to Satsuki, the struggling child trapped under one arm, and then marched towards the guest's quarters, the girl's cries of "Idiot!!" becoming less distinct in the distance.

And that inauspicious occasion was the first time that Kiryuin Satsuki and Matoi Ryuko met, or at least the first time that either could remember.

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Ryuko ran the comb through Satsuki's hair, slowly teasing out the knots that were the frequent offspring of their training. It was a task that more properly should have been left to one of Satsuki's innumerable attendants, or even to Ryuko's sole maidservant, Mankanshoku Mako; but Mako, though well-meaning, had a tendency to distraction and had once previously sent Satsuki out to attend to the representatives of the *bakufu* with a tortoiseshell comb still lodged in her hair. So Ryuko had taken this duty on herself, and besides, it allowed her to play the obsessive little game that she'd created for herself:

*Multiples of three knots: she loves me.  
More than five knots: we'll always be together.  
More than ten knots: we'll become lovers.*

Nine knots. Once again there were nine knots. Ryuko began to suspect that Satsuki's hair had something against her. She regretted now that she'd not stolen a kiss when she'd had the chance; her slight delay to gloat had allowed Satsuki to compose herself, and Ryuko had suddenly found herself being rolled onto the tatami and put into some complicated hold that had left her arms numb. Still, she'd been permitted the reward of an embrace for her triumph in the duel, comedic in its chastity while the two of them remained in their armor. But better yet, she'd been allowed to kiss Satsuki on the neck, along the vein that ran from chin to collarbone, on pain of certain death that she not leave any mark that might draw Hououmaru's or Lady Ragyo's attention. The peasant boys of the village would have mocked her for accepting something so trifling as payment, but the way that Satsuki's eyes closed and her breath quickened as Ryuko ran her tongue over the skin, feeling the blood pumping beneath, made her ache. She wouldn't have traded it for a night of passion – no, not even a full month of love-making – with anyone else in the world.

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In the years following the incident with the peach tree, Satsuki saw more of Ryuko. The Matoi clan had been renowned vassals of the Kiryuins for many generations: Ryuko's grandfather had led a company of the Kiryuin cavalry during the Battle of Sekigahara where they had fought at the side of Tokugawa Ieyasu, and he had made a name for himself both through his tactical awareness and skill in hand-to-hand combat. It was even said that with the twin swords that Isshin now carried he had struck an arrow from the air that otherwise would have found its mark in the heart of Satsuki's grandmother, who'd imprudently insisted on riding out with her contingent. The victory of the Tokugawa forces had cemented the Kiryuins' position of power near the capital, though many suspected that they would have maneuvered themselves into a position of advantage even if Toyotomi had been triumphant, such was their reach and skill in politics as well as martial affairs. But the aftermath of relative peace had not proved as kind to the Matoi family however; their stock-in-trade was the conduct of warfare and with no one to subjugate their wealth and resources began to dwindle.

Matters had finally come to a head. Isshin had taken a young wife – beautiful, it was true, but frail – in the hopes that she would bear him a son who would marry into a more affluent

family. But she gave birth to only a single daughter, Ryuko, before she died, shortly before the death of Satsuki's own father. So Isshin had sold up the family estates, settled his debts, and moved his family and remaining retinue to a more modest estate near Honnou village, within walking distance of the Kiryuin household where he hoped his council and experience, at least, might prove of some value. And there Ryuko was to be tutored and occasionally to attend to Satsuki, in the hopes that she might learn to comport herself at court, and at least give the impression of a young woman of breeding at some indeterminate time in the future.

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"And how is Isshin-sama?" Satsuki adjusted the blue silk of her sash, checking its symmetry against the white and gold of her kimono.

Ryuko sighed as she finished the fit of her own clothing. Her father was becoming more and more withdrawn.

"His joints and back are troubling him... And he spends all his time at mother's shrine."

She omitted to mention that he was increasingly clumsy, his one good eye causing him to bump into objects around their villa. Only the previous week he'd put his hand through the paper screens to Ryuko's room while trying to open the door.

"And those miscreant retainers of his?"

Ryuko turned wolfishly to her friend, teeth showing in a wicked grin.

"Oooh... Shall I tell Kinagase-san that you were asking after him?"

Satsuki looked utterly horrified, and glanced around the room for her sword.

"You will do no such thing!"

Still, unlike Mikisugi, who was as garrulous as a flock of chattering birds, Kinagase at least had the courtesy to remain silent in the main. Just as well, all things considered, given the clumsy pronouncements that he tended to issue when he did speak.

"By the heavens, can you imagine it," Satsuki continued, "'Let me tell you two useful pieces of information. One: I love you. Two: You will be my wife.'"

It wasn't a bad impression, another example of the strange talents that Satsuki concealed, and Ryuko snorted with laughter.

"Stop! Stop! You're terrible."

Satsuki relaxed and smiled. Imitating people was a secret delight, and it irked her that it was a skill she could only enjoy in the company of her closest friends.

"I apologize, Ryuko. The two of them are worth fifty men apiece on the battlefield..." Satsuki's thought trailed off, as she tried to balance honesty with some positive assertion.

“and Kinagase-san’s loyalty to your father is commendable, but his brushwork... and that poetry of his...”

Ryuko crossed her arms, resting them, and then her head, against Satsuki’s shoulders.

“My poetry’s terrible too, and you like me.”

The assertion provoked only the subtlest of smiles; Satsuki’s mind was far distant.

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The affair of the peach tree was never quite forgotten, even as Satsuki turned fifteen. Sometimes, when Ryuko infuriated her, as was all too frequently the case, she would demand restitution: that all the stolen fruit be replaced. And sometimes even Lady Ragyo would join the discussion, nonchalantly asking, “Has Ryuko-sama replaced the missing fruit yet, Satsuki?” At times like that Isshin would just scowl at his daughter, even as she tried to deflect the question.

Late spring, and as the temperature soared, uncommonly early that year, life on the estate slowed to a standstill. At noon the smooth black rocks in the Zen garden were so hot that they might been fresh pulled from the core of the earth, and even at the deepest point of night the stillness of the air was suffocating, no cooler than standing in a forge the day before battle, surrounded by hot rivers of molten metal.

In the shade of her chambers, Satsuki lay on her mattress, clothed only in the lightest *yukata* she had been able to find. It was tempting to make her way to the estate’s baths, but her mother had retired there with her latest aide, a young, bespectacled woman of the Hououmaru family, and left strict instructions that they not be disturbed. Amplified through the floorboards she could hear the footsteps of the few servants who were resilient, or dedicated, enough to continue going about their chores in the heat. The slow, perfectly controlled steps of Soroi as he worked in the main rooms. The resonant thumps as Gamagoori marched through the kitchens. And, in a different register of near-silence, the unexpected shuffling of someone attempting to mask their presence as they came up the corridor adjacent to her chambers. Satsuki glanced quickly to the far side of the room where her late father’s sword, Bakuzan, lay out of reach on its stand, and placed her hand quietly on the hilt of the dagger she always kept by her bed. The paper panels were suffused with light from the noonday sun, almost painful to look at, and it was only a moment before a shadow became apparent, moving across them with care. The unseen visitor stopped, crouched, then turned and moved stealthily back along the corridor. As the shadow disappeared there was the slightest sound, someone talking to themselves, or giggling mischievously, but it was too far away to distinguish the one from the other with any certainty.

Satsuki lay poised for a while longer, but there was no further sound. Then she rose quickly, crossed the room and crisply slid the panel open. The corridor was empty, as expected, but by her door was a little tribute: a fine black lacquered tray, packed to overflowing with spring flowers – *sakura*, *ume*, *momo* – and at its center, a large and perfectly ripe peach.

It felt like a little victory: a peace offering from the vagabond girl, an acknowledgment of the Kiryuins' inherent superiority. Not that Satsuki disliked Ryuko, in truth, but the younger girl was too informal in her friendship, too obstinate in her anger, and perhaps a little too close in ability, at least with the sword, to Satsuki herself not to be put in her place. With a glance to and fro along the corridor to verify she was unobserved, Satsuki withdrew to her room with the tray and sat cross-legged to examine its contents.

Ryuko had outdone herself, and Satsuki was momentarily impressed. To find a fruit this large and ripe so early in the season could not have been easy. It was almost flattery. She ran her hand over the surface, enjoying the texture beneath her fingertips. But there was a slight defect, almost infuriating in its subtlety: she raised the fruit up, close to her eye, and her brow furrowed for a moment. Almost imperceptibly fine: a line on the surface of the peach. She pushed gently, not wishing to bruise the tender flesh and a piece shifted slightly, revealing in turn another segment that could be moved. So - it was a puzzle of sorts.

Satsuki sat back and held the fruit up in her right hand, long digits supporting it on fingertips. She could just eat her way to the center, but to do so would perhaps be to defeat the very purpose of the message. She'd heard the folk tales of the local peasantry, of puzzle boxes that opened infernal gateways when solved, but Satsuki was already a fervent rationalist and had long decided that such stories were simply a convenient method for the nobility to discourage troublesome curiosity. Besides, the thought of Ryuko as an *onmyoji*, a sorceress, was clearly risible; she had trouble remembering the simplest passages of literature, let alone complex incantations.

Piece by fragrant piece, the puzzle revealed itself. The bladework was quite exquisite: the cuts straight and without error, the corners precise. A blade of exceptional quality must have been used. The final few pieces came away, leaving only the pit and causing a moment of confusion. Was there truly nothing inside? It wouldn't be beyond Ryuko to pull such a meticulous prank; perhaps even now she was laughing at the effort that Satsuki had expended in anticipation of a reward at the center. *She probably thought Momotaro was going to jump out at her, the stuck-up idiot.* Satsuki bristled for a moment at the thought, but continued to examine the peach pit. It too had been cut into; a final push separated the two halves and a fragment of paper fluttered onto the tatami by her bare leg.

Working carefully with her nails so as not to damage the message, Satsuki unfolded it to reveal a few lines of shakily stroked characters:

*When the summer comes  
I'll pluck you like a ripe peach  
A blush on your cheeks*

Despite the choking temperature, Satsuki felt the blood surge to her face. She dropped the message which, seemingly eager for escape, rushed on invisible currents towards the doors for a moment before she caught it again.

A love note. No one had ever sent her such a thing; or perhaps more accurately, none had ever reached her safely. Ryuko, and the author surely was Ryuko from the rough script to the receptacle it had come in, had taken great pains that it not be intercepted by Lady Ragyo, or Hououmaru, or any one of the many others that might have waylaid it. Satsuki felt

momentarily light-headed – wafting the paper beneath her nose, she was certain she sensed the subtlest overtone of citrus. She closed her eyes, and for a moment felt strangely at peace, as though someone was cupping her heart in safe, careful hands.

It was a matter for later regret, but in the end she burnt the note, reducing it to ash in a little earthenware bowl, terrified that its contents would be discovered by Hououmaru or her mother. And then she attempted to burn the ashes themselves; convinced that they might yield up their secrets under some form of divination, she poured lamp oil over them and set them alight. The resulting conflagration almost set her room ablaze, but she finally reduced the missive to a fine ash that was later scattered over the gravel pathways that crisscrossed the estate as she walked through the gardens.

So the peach tree was no longer mentioned in any form of public discussion. Guests were sometimes surprised that a flush of color would come to Satsuki's cheeks if she saw Ryuko eating a peach; but they assumed it was embarrassment at the younger girl's lack of manners, and the way she allowed the juice to run down her chin as she chewed, a grin on her face.

Thus began Matoi Ryuko's strange courtship of Kiryuin Satsuki.

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"Satsuki-sama." The voice was deferent and formal, but nonetheless the speaker had appeared outside the door undetected by either Satsuki or Ryuko.

"Ragyo-sama desires your presence at an audience in the central chambers," she continued. "Ryuko-sama is also to attend – her father has already arrived."

Satsuki could feel the question that Ryuko was about to ask, but she placed a finger to her lips.

"Thank you, Hououmaru. Tell my mother that we will attend her momentarily."

"As you wish, Satsuki-sama."

They waited silently, expectant for the gentle creaking of the boards in the corridor, and the judder of the door to the grounds opening.

"Has your mother...?" Ryuko was the first to speak.

"Spoken further about a betrothal?" Satsuki shook her head. "No, it's not been mentioned for some months now. Not after we last argued about it." In fact the disappearance of this topic of conversation had become a perpetual source of disquiet for Satsuki – it was rare for her mother to relent until she had what she wanted.

Ryuko was more content, however, that marriage appeared unlikely in the near future. She knew that as eldest, indeed as only child, in the Kiryuin household, marriage was a certainty for Satsuki at some point, but she entertained a number of romantic notions of how she might best circumvent that particular irritation. Best of all was the adventurous fantasy that she

would become Satsuki's personal bodyguard and assassin, carrying out secret missions for her and protecting her from harm when her husband was absent, ideally from as close quarters as possible; indeed if that protection need extend into the bedroom itself, that was all to the good. She'd gone as far as to demand that she be trained in the *shinobi* arts as a *kunoichi*, and that, more than anything else she'd done of late, had incensed her father. Combat by stealth was not the Matoi way, it was claimed: better to charge full-tilt into the mouths of the cannons than to wage warfare from the shadows.

But while the romance of a life of intrigue and adventure in Satsuki's service was appealing, Ryuko was not so foolish as to submit to the dream entirely. The little voice of common sense, that she so often tried to suppress, would whisper quietly to her that reality would, in the end, be different to that, though hopefully not unendurable. Satsuki would eventually marry, ideally someone equally rich and of high estate, and she would have children: a daughter for the Kiryuin name and a son for her husband's sake. And then – and Ryuko understood that this was a dark thought, even if it was rooted in affection – and then Satsuki's husband would meet his end, either peacefully in his bed, or nobly on the battlefield; in any case a death beyond reproach which would yield no risk for Satsuki herself. And afterwards she would remain a widow, eliciting admiration at court for her commitment to her late husband's memory, while she and Ryuko raised her children together. It was true that this would require Ryuko to become Satsuki's lady-in-waiting, but such a position was not frowned upon in the upper tiers of society, and she had some hope that Isshin would accede to the idea, particularly if he felt that she would never amount to much as a wife.

So, it was with these thoughts in mind that Ryuko followed Satsuki through the corridors of the villa, a few steps behind as protocol dictated, as they made their way to where the audience was to be held. For anyone else Ryuko would have bristled at the subservient position, but walking behind Satsuki had pleasures of its own, most particularly when she was arrayed in her finest. The way the silk moved over her legs, making them almost visible as she walked; it was forever tempting just to reach out and run a hand over the back of her thigh.

Satsuki stopped up short, so crisply that Ryuko almost ran into the back of her. Someone else was in the corridor, and the gradual bend of the waist as Satsuki began to bow telegraphed a warning. Heart thumping, Ryuko followed suit, hands clasped at her waist, leaning forward into *saikeirei* and beyond – to be any more respectful would have required fully kneeling and touching her forehead to the floor.

"Mother," she heard Satsuki almost whisper.

"Satsuki, our beloved daughter." The figure in white stopped before them both. Behind her, Ryuko could just see Hououmaru bringing up the rear. "And Ryuko-sama. How delightful that we see you again."

Lady Ragyo stepped past Satsuki and stood in front of Ryuko, who felt the blood roar in her ears. Trapped in the bow, she could only see the lower half of Ragyo's kimono, but the material was brilliant, blinding white, even in the muted sunlight of the afternoon.

"Let us see you properly, Ryuko-sama," Ragyo placed a slim, pale finger under Ryuko's chin, applying gentle pressure until she straightened up.



Ryuko dared a glance upwards, and saw once again Lady Ragyo's face: heart-stoppingly beautiful and heart-wrenchingly terrifying. It was the face the ancients must have seen in the avalanche – all perfect whiteness before it fell upon them and crushed the breath from their lungs, the vengeance of the ice giants. And around it, the blindingly white hair, so white that as the light caught it, you could see rainbows dancing. The old women that worked the kitchens had sworn to Ryuko that Lady Ragyo's hair had once been as black as her daughter's, but that on the night of her husband's – of Soichiro's – death, the color had left it – spirited away along with his soul. And Ryuko had heard the other rumors too: that she'd killed him with sorcery, the same fate that had snuffed out the breath of Kiryuin men back a thousand generations, and that those in power, or those in want of power, always came to the women of the Kiryuin family for divination or contact with the otherworld.

"We are informed that you will likely surpass even your father with the sword," The eyes were wide, unblinking, the deep brown of antique wood in a funeral bier. A single, slender finger touched Ryuko's chest through the opening in her kimono.

"Take care that you do not pierce our daughter's heart, Ryuko-sama." The corners of Ragyo's mouth were... It was impossible to tell whether it was a smile or a snarl, and Ryuko felt the hair at the back of her neck stand to attention as her blood became a frozen river.

*Does she know?*

"I take great care of it, Ragyo-sama," was all Ryuko managed to stammer, but Ragyo turned away, past Satsuki and started down the corridor again.

"We are certain that you do. Come." There was lightness in the voice, as though the two of them were sharing a joke, but Ragyo did not look back and Hououmaru only followed along as the two of them headed for the audience chamber.

Inside, Satsuki and Ryuko were separated – the older girl to take up her wonted position at her mother's side, a foot or so respectably behind her, while Ryuko had to sit next to Isshin. He glared at her, as usual, but seemed satisfied enough with the condition in which she had presented herself.

Ragyo raised a hand, no more than an inch or so, but nonetheless the room became still.

"Our dear friends," her voice echoed in the room as though she were moving from guest to guest. Ryuko suddenly felt her breath by her ear, and shivered. "It delights us greatly to see you all here today, a day on which we have such auspicious news to convey."

There was a momentary susurration of surprise, but Ryuko saw nothing but confusion and no little concern on Satsuki's face. Surely a marriage hadn't been arranged without her knowledge?

Ragyo placed a hand upon her stomach with a small smile of satisfaction.

"We have been blessed, and are with child once again."

This time the noise was almost a roar.

“How?” Ryuko mouthed the word and looked across sharply at Satsuki who just shook her head, a small but decisive motion.

Kuroido, the odious lecher that was Lady Ragyo’s head steward, moved forward and bowed deeply, touching his head to the mats.

“Ragyo-sama – I speak for all assembled here when I say how happy this news makes us.”

“As always, Kuroido, your happiness is my first concern,” she replied with a crystalline laugh.

“My lady.” He bowed deeper still, pressing his forehead to the ground.

Ryuko looked on in confusion. *Doesn't he realize that she's just laughing at him?*

Inhaling deeply, Ragyo closed her eyes and placed both hands on her belly.

"We shall name our daughter Kiryuin Harime no Nui."

Satsuki's steward, Soroi, bowed respectfully, but without any of the excesses shown by Kuroido.

"And if the child is a boy, Ragyo-sama?"

Her eyes opened wide with amusement, and again Ryuko saw the slight, unfathomable curl of her lips.

"We are *assured* it will be a girl."

A low murmur rippled through the room, but the elder, wiser guests were all nodding sagely. Of course it would be a girl; the Kiryuin lineage was maintained through a legacy of mothers and daughters, and the rare sons born into the line invariably died young and unlamented.

Far from where Ryuko sat, near the main entrance where a few privileged residents of Honnou village had been allowed to attend, there was a momentary commotion: sleeves pulled, voices raised in anger or entreaty. Then a young man, perhaps three years older than Ryuko at most, placed a small lacquered box on the floor and prostrated himself in front of Lady Ragyo and the assembled nobility.

"Ragyo-sama! As a representative of the people of Honnou, I beg you receive this small gift from us in honor of this occasion, and in grateful thanks for your careful stewardship of our lands."

For a moment, Ryuko saw Ragyo's eyebrows rise, as though this was something truly unexpected, but then she regained her mask of absolute composure, and gestured for the young man to approach.

The box was slim, black, and the chips on the polished surface hinted at age and an eventful history. Embossed in flaking gold leaf on the top surface was a crest: a five-lobed persimmon

flower. Try as Ryuko might, she was unable to link the design to any family she knew of, either from the lands around Honnou or even further afield.

The young man lifted the lid carefully, setting it down with a care appropriate to its apparent antiquity. Inside, on a bed of radiant, red silk, was a slim dagger, black-handled within a black scabbard.

"If I may, Ragyo-sama..." the young man began, lifting it and drawing it slightly to reveal the blade.

There was an explosion that blew out the lamps at the head of the room, and shook the floor and panels like a transient earthquake. Ryuko could see the guests and nobles start to rise, but it was too late: the young man was sprawled on his back, his right arm twisted to breaking point, held seemingly effortlessly by Ragyo's left hand. She had half stood, had just moved forward and up half a step, but she had him pinned to the mats so firmly that he roared with pain. The dagger was still in his hand, but the blade was broken off at the hilt, pieces scattered on the floor around him. And she was still smiling, the strange, impenetrable half-smile Ryuko had seen before.

"Calm yourselves. We are unharmed." Ragyo continued to stare at the man, like a cat with its paw placed firmly on the body of a struggling rodent, until finally the guards came forward and seized him.

"Tell me, young man. Who are you, that come into our house wishing harm to our person in the presence of our friends?"

He struggled against his captors, and two, even three soldiers seemed less able to restrain him than Ragyo's lightly placed wrist.

"I am Shingen of Honnou village. My sister Furi came to the estate to work in your employ. We have not heard from her in over a year, just like other girls from the village! Murderess!"

The answer seemed to delight Ragyo, who began to laugh in the cold, crystalline way that put Ryuko in mind of daggers of ice suspended perilously above her in a mountain cave.

"Oh, but you are mistaken, dear Shingen-san," she ran a hand through the perfect, glacial hair, and rainbows danced in the darkness. "We remember Furi-san, do we not, Hououmaru?"

Hououmaru nodded, seemingly unperturbed by the apparent threat to her mistress.

"A charming girl: well-mannered. A credit to her family, as we are sure you are also. But incautious with her heart, we think," and with that she glanced briefly, but with intensity, at Ryuko. "She gave it away too easily - such a tragedy. But come, Hououmaru. We must make amends and have this young man for dinner this evening."

Later, and the room was empty; Ryuko alone remained, still sat carefully in *seiza* as her father had taught her. Lady Ragyo had left with Hououmaru for whatever dinner or diversions they were planning; Satsuki had been similarly summoned away to attend her mother. Isshin was gone, along with Mikisugi and Kinagase, checking the grounds for further

assassins. In her lap was a single fragment of the dagger, fractured cleanly into a triangle of black. Ragyo had brushed the worries of Kuroido and the others present aside; the blade had been of poor quality, she claimed, purely by a combination of chance and skill she had struck it on the flat and it had shattered. Ryuko turned the piece over in her hand: she knew a little of metalworking and metallurgy, as much as her father had deemed it important she know in order that she could tell a good blade from a poor one, and the metal seemed far from suspect. The wavering line of the *hamon* was beautiful, like rough seas on the coast, and the *nioi*, the crystalline particles embedded in the blade, danced like fireflies. And beneath that shifting starfield were inclusions of red, like fine veins through the metal: something she had never seen before.

No one else had seen. No one was fast enough, or had been paying sufficient attention. Satsuki would have noticed, but she had been behind her mother, her line of sight blocked. And Isshin-the-younger would also have noticed perhaps, but now with his eye, and his age, it had gone unseen by him too. Ragyo hadn't blocked the blade; Ryuko had seen Shingen draw and attack in one smooth motion, a precise strike by someone who had rehearsed this moment over and over again, repeated until his mind need only say "move" and his body would execute its task. She'd seen the blade strike Ragyo at the solar plexus, an undoubtedly fatal blow, but when it had touched the white silk of her kimono it hadn't slipped through like a hot coal dropped into snow, but for a moment she was sure she'd seen it deform and then shatter, as surely as if he'd struck it against a rocky cliff-edge.

She turned the triangle of metal in her fingers: now only a beautiful memory of a weapon.

The next day when Ryuko called at the estate, Hououmaru informed her that Satsuki had been taken ill and would not be receiving visitors, and though she waited at the gates for several hours, in the end she was forced to return home without seeing her friend, and without the opportunity to discuss the events of the previous day.

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Spring, earlier that same year: the strange twilight time between Ryuko's seventeenth and Satsuki's eighteenth birthdays, the unnatural interval where for a few months they were the same age, the unnatural interval wherein Ryuko would do all in her power to usurp the natural order of seniority.

Backed into the corner of the storage space in which she had cloistered herself, Satsuki stifled a laugh. From outside, somewhere in the periphery of the building, she could hear Ryuko's shouts of "Kiryuin! Kiryuin Satsuki!! Show yourself!"

Her mother was absent, gone with Hououmaru to the capital, ostensibly to see the newly-sprung blossoms but more likely to perform auguries for the Shogun and consult on matters of the occult. Isshin was gone too, travelling as her bodyguard and companion, and to see to affairs of his own, so it had been none too surprising when Ryuko appeared in the early afternoon, a jug of rice wine in her hand, half of which she'd consumed on the walk over.

*Sake* held little attraction for Satsuki, who preferred the stillness and refinement of tea ceremony, but she had a weakness for challenges, especially when the strengths of the

Kiryuins versus the Matoi family were called into question. Thus it had not been difficult for Ryuko to convince her to participate in various challenges of coordination and dexterity – though not of knowledge and reasoning, unsurprisingly – where drinking was the accepted forfeit for failure. And Satsuki’s uncontrolled laughter at one of Ryuko’s failed attempts had led to the current game of hide-and-seek – a response to the threat of actual physical harm, or at least a tarnished reputation, were Ryuko to get her hands on her.

Out in the corridor, Ryuko was moving slowly and supposedly stealthily, but her intent was obvious from her whispered chant of “Kiryuin... Kiryuin Satsukiiiiiii...” and her prey was forced to jam her knuckles into her mouth in order to suppress another attack of the giggles. Shown in silhouette, Satsuki could see Ryuko move past the concealed door to her hiding space; as she did so an idea formed, a rebellious seed of a concept, but to put that plan in motion Satsuki would need to escape into the gardens and the forest beyond. She held her breath as Ryuko moved further down the corridor – only a few steps more and she could fling open the door and make a break for the outside.

The footsteps stopped, and then inevitably started to move back towards the concealed room. Had she made a noise? Surely not... Then had Ryuko remembered the secret storage spaces that were hidden throughout the estate? Had the two of them ever hidden here when they had been younger? The answer was moot now – she was clearly standing directly by the hidden door. Satsuki braced herself, trying to find purchase on the wooden floor with her bare feet, gripping with her toes as best she could.

“Found you!”

Ryuko flung open the door and lunged forward but Satsuki was already moving, diving forward under the outstretched arms and allowing herself to slide on the polished wood floor of the corridor, before she rose and started to run for the gardens. Behind her was only tumult as Ryuko fell into the cupboard, bedding and tools collapsing onto her.

And then the blinding transition from the soft light of the villa’s passages to the bright sunlight of the grounds. Satsuki was running at speed now, feeling the grass between her toes, still damp from the morning dew; now she could laugh, and in laughing she felt a great surge of energy. She dared a glance back, and saw Ryuko, disorientated, emerging onto the veranda.

“Dammit, Kiryuin!”

Delight at the ridiculousness of the situation just made Satsuki accelerate, pressing onwards towards the path into the woods, but once in the shadows, under the cover of the trees she slowed a little, heeding the little voice that had been nagging at her.

*Don’t go too fast. You wouldn’t want that she never catches you.*

The contrast of the white of her kimono ought to have been visible between the dark trunks, and Satsuki could hear Ryuko’s steps on the path behind, in concert with occasional cacophony as she ricocheted off and through the bushes. The torches of the little shrine were clear enough ahead of her now, and she sped up again – her objective would soon be obvious. Seen from the villa, the ascents of the hills, the almost-mountains, to the west of the estate

were imposing and beautiful, but from within the forest itself, where the rock surfaces were doubly black with shadows, they still made Satsuki's hair stand on end, just as they had done when she was a small child. Still, there was no time for fear if Ryuko was not to catch her before she reached her destination, so she grabbed a torch, pushed aside the false wall at the rear of the shrine and slipped through the hidden portal into the mountain interior.

The first few hundred steps down were beautifully cut and finished, a testament to the skill of the stonemason, but as Satsuki descended further into the suffocating blackness the steps became rougher, harder to negotiate safely, and the final tens were little more than the natural structures of the rock, shaped by the gods alone while the world was still young. She found the dead end, as she expected, and placing the torch in an iron stand waited for Ryuko, whose arrival was foretold by a litany of curses as she descended the steps.

"Damn, Satsuki. You could have said that the ceiling lowered here!" That particular outburst was presaged by a noise like someone striking a hammer against the rock, and Satsuki struggled to suppress a laugh.

"You won't be laughing in a minute, milady," Ryuko finally appeared at the base of the stairs, short of breath and disheveled from her tussles with the forest and the rocks of the passage, and still swaying slightly from the effects of the rice wine. Satsuki backed further up against the wall, but it was impossible not to smile at Ryuko's attempts to appear threatening. She strode forward, hoping to intimidate, but the effect was undermined as she misjudged the remaining steps in the flickering light; her foot met empty air instead of firm bedrock and she fell forwards, landing flat on her face.

In time, though far too long for Ryuko's liking, Satsuki's laughter reverberated way to nothing, echoes escaping back up the passageway to the surface. She pulled Ryuko up, checking that no permanent damage had been done: no missing teeth at least.

"How is your nose?" There was a little dab of blood beneath one nostril.

"Kiss it better?" Ryuko did her best to look endearingly hopeful, but Satsuki just shook her head slightly, in an almost infinitesimal negation.

She backed up against the wall, pulling Ryuko forward by the hand.

"What can you see?"

Ryuko squinted – as far as she could tell there was just Satsuki and behind her the roughly textured rocky surface of the cave wall.

"You?" It was all she wanted to see at that moment.

"Behind me, you idiot." It was a reproach, but an affectionate one at least, and Satsuki smiled, sharing the mischievous glance.

"Behind you?" Ryuko began to grin too, the pain in her nose forgotten. "You mean that sweet Kiryuin..."

Satsuki sighed. “The wall, Ryuko. Look properly at the wall.”

Her head was swimming from the rice wine, and that and the blow she’d received were making it hard to focus, so she ran her fingers over the rock instead, feeling lines and whorls, depressions and protuberances. Feeling... order. It was almost impossible to see in the torchlight, but the surface of the wall hadn’t been textured by age or nature, it was instead the clear product of intent. And just by where Satsuki stood was a fine line running vertically from floor to ceiling.

“It’s... a door?”

“You should feel honored. No one outside the family has seen this for hundreds of years.”

“If that’s a proposition to become part of your family – I graciously accept.”

Ryuko bowed for a moment, then stepped back and adopted an exaggerated pose of proclamation.

“Vaguely threatening and opaque pronouncements!!”

She pulled herself up to her full height and placed her hands as though resting them on a staff or the hilt of sheathed sword.

“Whaddya think? Reckon I could be a Kiryuin?”

Satsuki began to laugh again, but the light, warm laugh of affection this time.

“You could have some Kiryuin in you, indeed.”

“I’d certainly like some Kiryuin in me, like maybe one or two...”

“I need some help with the door, Ryuko.” Satsuki quickly cut off the sentence before it gave her cause to blush. “Do you still have the rice wine with you? And that little knife you’re always carrying?”

She disappeared amongst the rocks for a moment, and then reappeared with three small bowls: one in wood, one bright orange metal – copper, it seemed – and one roughly carved from stone. The wooden one was filled with water from a rivulet that had forced its way through a fissure in the rocks, the metal one with a small portion of the rice wine – no more than a mouthful – while the last, the stone bowl, received a few drops of blood from Satsuki’s palm, the result of a small, precise cut with Ryuko’s knife. Then Satsuki set the three bowls down in front of the door in a perfect triangle, and gestured for Ryuko to help her.

“Why the bowls?” Ryuko inquired as between them they pushed the door open. It was massive stone, more than a foot thick, but it swung easily as though perfectly balanced on its pivot. “Are they wards so that we can go in?”

“They’re to prevent anything from coming out.” Satsuki took the torch from the stand and disappeared through the doorway. “If you believe that sort of thing, of course.”

With better light the passageway might have seemed spacious, impressive even, but illuminated only by the torch it was claustrophobic, oppressive, the weight and the threat of the rock above ever apparent – only the little bubble of luminance keeping it in suspension. Satsuki pressed on, leaving Ryuko in the dwindling light behind her.

“I thought you didn’t believe any of that superstitious stuff! To stop *what* coming out? Hey, Satsuki!”

Satsuki could sense space ahead of her, and quickened her step.

“All superstitions are grounded in at least some reality...” Satsuki called back down the passage, then smiled wryly. “How do you expect to win my hand, if you can’t even protect me from the most trivial of otherworldly threats?”

That, or the prospect of being trapped in the impenetrable dark, was sufficient to bring Ryuko to her side.

“You know I’d protect you from...”

She stopped up short beside Satsuki, sensing the openness around them, and was surprised when Satsuki took her hand again. The sound alone, the change in reverberation, was sufficient to indicate they’d entered some sort of chamber: the immediate, instant impression being that of cavernous enormity. Ryuko allowed herself to be led forward, trusting Satsuki’s knowledge, or intuition, without question for a change. And when they stopped, Satsuki raised the torch and said but a single word.

“Look.”

There was ancient wood, and pitted metal, a mechanism of intricate complexity and immense size. Beams and spindles, and threads upon threads extending back into the darkness. It stirred memories in Ryuko that were so old that they seemed to belong to another lifetime, of sitting beside her mother as she worked her hand loom with frail, fragile fingers, even that little effort almost too much for her.

“Behold! The source of our power! The Seimei Loom!”

Perhaps it was the wine, but for a moment Satsuki could not resist conforming to her family’s custom for grandiose proclamations. But behind her Ryuko knelt, and touched her fingers to the cold stone.

“Is this... *blood* here?”

The flickering light was insufficient to allow certainty, but intermixed with the dark brown of antique stains were bright red splashes of something more recent.

“Our family history relates that in more primitive times blood sacrifices were made to the loom to ensure its good favor.” Release flooded into Satsuki as she was finally able to share the secrets she’d teased out after months studying the fraying parchments of the Kiryuin archives.



“Legends tell that if an appropriate contract is made with the loom, it will make anything you desire, anything at...”

The speech was cut off as she swallowed and tensed, rigid as an iron pillar. She'd felt Ryuko's fingertips brush her Achilles tendons, and then move delicately up the backs of her calves. When the caress reached the backs of her knees, her legs almost gave way, her one unforgiveable physical weakness that only Ryuko seemed able to exploit. Then the fingertips, and it was perhaps only the index finger of each hand, began to move up her thighs, tracing the curve of the muscles, and she realized that they were also lifting the back of her kimono. So she gently took Ryuko's hands, pulled her upright and drew her arms around her waist instead, hoping she wouldn't find her way to worse mischief.

Ryuko placed her chin on Satsuki's right shoulder, as well as she could, given the inch or so in height that separated the two of them.

“If it can make anything, could it make us a marriage bed?”

She grinned, but squeezed Satsuki's waist gently.

“*Matoi...* this is something of significance I'm sharing with you. Please try to be more serious.”

Perhaps it came out too disapproving, too parental, or too much like something Isshin would say, but Satsuki felt her friend pull back from her and then rest her forehead on her shoulder, the subtle gesture that she'd come to realize meant that Ryuko was struggling to say something from deep within her.

“Do you think it could make you love me?”

Satsuki closed her eyes. There it was again – the signal proof that she still had less skill with words than she did with weapons. She turned slowly – careful not to dislodge Ryuko's hands, with all that would mean – and lifted her face up again.

It would be so easy to move a little forward. So easy to close the distance between them and let their lips touch. Her eyes were closed, but Satsuki was sure that she could feel Ryuko's heart hammering in her ribcage, propagated from one to the other in the embrace – certain, that was, until she realized that it was the beating of her own heart that she could feel.

“Ryuko, I...”

There must have been other pathways in the darkness, perhaps little more than tortuous cracks running to the surface, because she felt a draft and heard the loom chatter briefly behind her. But it was chilling enough that she stopped herself, and only reached up and instead placed a fleeting kiss on Ryuko's forehead, as if she were kissing her to sleep.

“The wine is making you maudlin, you idiot.”

She split the torch in two, and wrapped Ryuko's unresisting fingers around half of it.

“Go. Go on back to the surface. I'll shut this monster away safely.”

Ryuko didn't move, but held her position, head bowed: a statue of disconsolation.

"You're sending me back home."

With a snort of mock exasperation, Satsuki turned her around bodily and pushed her towards the passage back to the mysterious doorway.

"No, I'm sending you back to my chambers. Now do as your elders and betters instruct."

She gave her a forceful shove then, as though they were both children still to reach even their tenth year, and Ryuko finally disappeared into the passage, the torchlight bobbing like *kitsunebi* in the distance.

"Have a care for the low ceiling!" Satsuki called, but the chain of expletives that echoed back to her confirmed that the warning had come too late.

Splinters of wood had fallen from the torch when she'd split it, and Satsuki meticulously gathered each one, storing it carefully inside the folds of her clothes before sweeping the torch backwards and forwards for any remaining pieces. Then, when she had convinced herself at least twice over that no sign of their visit could be found, she returned to the door, dragging it closed and ensuring the seal was complete. Then the three bowls: removed, and washed in the underground stream until no trace of their former contents remained. She dried them, taking care that not a single droplet would reveal their use – and it was unfortunate, if inevitable, that her sleeves had to be pressed into duty for this menial task – and then she set them back where she had found them, and finally she began the long climb up to the hidden entrance and the shrine.

As she reached the upper stages of the man-made steps, and the creeping daylight turned the blacks to greys and eventually to subtle shades of greens and browns, she felt an unexpected pang of nerves and excitement. What if Ryuko wasn't waiting for her at the entrance, what if she had already returned to the house? And what if she were to return to her chambers and find Ryuko already under the quilt, her clothes folded neatly in the corner of the room, bare shoulders showing above the pattern of the fabric? There was plenty of spare bedding, of course, and the quilt was large – she could sleep on top of it in her clothes, if need be. Or...

In the end the fear, or anticipation, was unwarranted. Satsuki exited the shrine, carefully restoring the false wall behind her, only to find a pair of familiar legs protruding from a nearby bush, their position demarked by anguished moaning. She pulled Ryuko into a sitting position, noting with distaste the unfocused gaze and gagging at the terrible smell.

"S'ry." It was a half mumbled apology of sorts. "G't b'red... Dr'nk rest the w'ne."

A second, empty, jug lay by her, its stopper rolling forlornly in the dirt.

*Oh, Ryuko. Not an entire jug on your own.* The admonishment was about to cross her lips when Satsuki felt Ryuko's stomach tense, and she had scarcely enough time to turn her to the side before she was spectacularly sick again.

"S'ry S'tsuki... L'v you... Y'r my b'st fr'nd."

So when the wave of nausea had passed, Satsuki picked up Ryuko across her shoulders, as she'd seen the soldiers bear their fallen comrades, and carried her back to the house and her bed chamber. There she stripped Ryuko of her soiled clothing – but only as far as her underclothes, for decency's sake – and wrapped her in her best quilt and allowed her to sleep. Satsuki had sat next to her, making sure she had fresh water and an empty bowl if need be, and had dozed lightly and dreamt of the chattering of the loom. And the next day, when Ryuko was sufficiently restored as to be able to drink a little miso and eat some plain rice, Satsuki mocked her mercilessly that she'd spent the night in her bed and had no recollection of the pleasures they'd enjoyed together.

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On the second day of Satsuki's illness Ryuko was again turned away at the gate to the Kiryuin estate, and on the third day also, but on the fourth day she was greeted not by Hououmaru, but by Soroi, who led her up the pathway to the villa through the red-leaved arbors.

"Satsuki-sama is very weak," and Ryuko was surprised at how diminished his own steps seemed to be, in stark contrast with the vigor that normally marked his passage in defiance of his age. "But your presence will lift her spirits, I think."

Her maids had moved her bed to a room overlooking the ornamental lake, and she was at least sitting when Ryuko entered, but Satsuki's skin was ashen, and the long black hair, that normally had a vitality all its own, was greasy and lifeless. Ryuko shuddered for a moment: her friend resembled nothing so much as her mother in the days leading up to her death.

"It seems I am at your mercy, Ryuko-sama." Her lips smiled, but the eyes were tired and haunted, black rings beneath them blacker still upon the white skin.

"I don't take advantage of helpless waifs," Ryuko did her best to smile in return, but the gesture felt hollow and equally forced. "And besides, I'd probably snap you in half, state you're in now."

She sat down on the quilt beside Satsuki, resting against one of the dark, aged wood posts that framed the room, and then Ryuko let the older girl lean back against her, carefully placing an arm around her waist.

"I brought you some fruit," she offered, pulling a nashi pear from inside her clothes and rubbing it clean on the fine silk of the quilt.

"I thought it would have been peaches..." Satsuki's voice was quiet, but there was a tiny undercurrent of disappointment.

"Satsuki the farmer speaks," Ryuko chided, "but they're not in season and besides, they don't keep that well. Did you think my feelings were so transitory?"

"'Transitory'. It's not like you to use such language; do I really appear so unwell?"

Satsuki felt around the bed for a knife to prepare the fruit, causing Ryuko to roll her eyes.

“You could just bite into it, y’know. Like the common peasantry have managed to do for hundreds of years.”

Satsuki shot her a stormy glance at the comment, as though she’d been instructed to eat from the pig trough, and for a moment Ryuko saw her usual demeanor, defiant beneath the appearance of frailty. For an instant, at least, she was reassured.

“Invalids can be so demanding. C’mon, give.”

There was only token resistance as Ryuko reclaimed the pear and, taking her little knife from inside her *obi*, she began to cut it into bite-sized segments.

“Sure you don’t want me to chew it for you? We could move it mouth-to-mouth, like the birds do.”

“That will *not* be necessary.”

There was bite in the voice, and a little color in the cheeks, and Ryuko relaxed further. Whatever the strange affliction was, it seemed to be countered by simple food and some good company. She stole a glance at the remains of Satsuki’s morning meal: rice, and some raw tuna that seemed free of spoil, of exceptional quality in fact. Was it possible, even conceivable, that someone was poisoning her? Gamagoori seemed to run the kitchens with a rod of iron, but there was always the possibility that something had escaped even his attention. Better to be safe; better to be certain.

So when the maids appeared later with a midday meal, Ryuko sent them away, though the scents set her own mouth watering. Instead she drew fresh water from the well herself, surprising the gardeners who had been raking the freshly fallen leaves, and she split the little package of lunch that Mako had made for her – the slightly overdone rice and the mysterious parcels with their authentically organic tubes and gristle – between the two of them.

“I’ll have Mako make a double portion tomorrow.” Ryuko combed out Satsuki’s hair as she rested against her, working with the simple wooden comb that she carried for herself, but there were no knots today, the hair unwilling to offer up any predictions for the future.

“You look like you haven’t slept since I last saw you.” Satsuki seemed strong enough now to respond to some curiosity. “What is it? Pain? Sickness?”

Satsuki waited until Ryuko was between strokes of the comb and then shook her head.

“I sleep, but I have no rest. During the day my strength returns, but I wake each morning weaker than the day before.”

“And your mother has nothing to say?” For all her customary bravado, Ryuko had a dread of Lady Ragyo, but it was also true that she knew of no one with better knowledge of herbs and the mysterious workings of the body.

Satsuki took the comb from Ryuko's hand and set it down beside them, then took her hand with its calloused fingers and drew Ryuko's arm around her waist again.

"She is preoccupied with her own condition."

She shifted against Ryuko, trying to find a more comfortable position.

"We should never have unsealed the loom, Ryuko." She closed her eyes and sighed. "I have terrible dreams now. I am in the cavern beneath the mountain and the loom is working; no matter what I say or demand, it keeps weaving. And eventually I see what is inside the mechanism: it is weaving me. And sometimes it's weaving you."

The thought of it made her hair stand on end, but Ryuko just pulled Satsuki a little closer.

"You should sleep. I'll keep watch while you rest."

Satsuki's eyes were fluttering closed and her voice was drowsy.

"Stay, Ryuko. Stay tonight. Mother will not let you sleep here, but there are rooms across the lake where you will be able to watch over me. Stay, and stop the spirits from taking me while I sleep."

Satsuki slept deeply, nestled against her friend, until the light began to fade. And when she awoke she was further restored, more like her usual self, and they talked for a while and ate the food that Soroi had brought from Mako, having made the journey to and from the Matoi estate in a fraction of the time it took Ryuko to make the same.

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Ryuko rolled herself in the blanket and looked out at Satsuki's room beyond the lake. A little earlier she'd observed a palanquin arrive at the central wing, accompanied by a company of horsemen, and after a number of ceremonies it had disgorged both Hououmaru and Lady Ragyo. The latter's belly had swelled noticeably since the announcement of her pregnancy, and this Ryuko found strange, but there was no one for her to ask whether this was an unusual turn of events or not. It seemed shorter than the customary duration for cats, for example, as she thought of the queen and the kittens she'd nursed in the barn on their estate, but maybe it was different for noble ladies – they probably had less time for such things. And she allowed herself the little luxury of imagining Satsuki pregnant, her belly tight as a drum, and placing her hand on it to feel the baby kick. "And what will you call her?" "Why, Ryuko, of course." She might have been deceiving herself, but it was a harmless enough deceit, and it cheered her a little after the worries of the day.

The lights had just been dimmed in Satsuki's quarters, the maids bowing at the entrance as they left, and Ryuko moved to afford herself a better view of the room and the approaches to it. She was missing a sword, but she at least had the little knife with her, and she'd broken the handle off an unidentifiable gardening tool which she would press into use as a staff if the need arose. In the cold night air, mist rose up off the surface of the lake, turning in spirals like exotic dancers. The light from the moon was blinding white, even though it was only half

full, and the vista became white with it, white building up layer upon layer, like snow on the mountainside.

Ryuko blinked. The white was the white of the dawn clouds, the sun rising over the horizon. Here and there in the blue sky, the pinpoints of the brightest stars were still visible. Her heart sank – she'd promised Satsuki, and sworn to herself, that she would stay awake until the dawn, and only sleep when it was clear any danger had passed. Cursing herself for her lack of stamina, she raced round the lake, desperate to determine whether Satsuki's condition had improved.

Her wish was to be confounded, however. She found Satsuki half out of the bed, the quilt and mattress in disarray as though she'd slept fitfully. And just as she had claimed, her skin was white, almost translucent, now – all the good of the previous day undone.

“Soroi! SOROI!!” Ryuko screamed the name, with a volume that even she found surprising.

The two of them did what they could to warm and restore Satsuki with tea and fresh food, but even Mako's mysterious *korokke* seemed to have lost their efficacy, and by the end of the day she was little better than she had been when Ryuko had first seen her the previous morning.

Evening came again, and Soroi dimmed the lamps and drew the panels closed. Satsuki was tucked carefully into bed, sleeping soundly and normally as far as Ryuko could tell. But out on the veranda, Soroi took her aside for a moment and to her surprise bowed deeply to her, deeper than even the peasants did when Lady Ragyo passed.

“Ryuko-sama – please look after Satsuki-sama.”

The weight of responsibility made her shudder for a moment, the unfamiliar feeling of someone else placing their trust in her, when the only person who had ever trusted her previously was Satsuki.

“Yeah... yeah... I got it.” She tried to quell her own fears with a little swagger. “That's what the Matoi clan does – bail out these dumb Kiryuins when they get themselves in trouble.”

The little room across the lake was to be her hiding place again for the night, and she settled herself against the wall, sufficiently far back that from the outside an observer would have seen only mottled shadows. She had her knife, and the staff, and a pair of usable, if unremarkable, swords that Soroi had brought her from the estate's armory. Fearing that a full stomach would make her drowsy, she hadn't eaten since lunch and had kept only a simple jug of water beside her; hopefully the pangs of hunger would prick her to wakefulness at least to the same extent that her growling stomach made her testy and short-tempered. As the light faded, and the mist rose off the lake once again she turned the little knife in her hands, testing the keenness of the tip against her leg.

Searing pain jolted her awake. She'd dozed, and in doing so had slumped forward, driving the knife a not inconsiderable distance into her thigh. She cursed herself again, but looking out of the room saw the mist still on the lake, the sky still black, the moon and stars perfectly visible. There was motion in Satsuki's quarters across the lake, shadows shifting against the light, but as she grasped the swords and prepared for an attack, she saw the panels open and

Lady Ragyo emerge, supported by Hououmaru. She was heavily pregnant now, unable to move with any speed, and it seemed that the birth of Satsuki's sister was surely imminent. Hououmaru continued to support her as they traversed the gravel pathways, and together they moved slowly towards the central wing where her own rooms lay.

When it was clear there was no chance of observation, Ryuko sprinted round the lake, swords in hand and burst into Satsuki's room. Again the bed was disarrayed, Satsuki slumped across the floor like a broken marionette, her nightclothes part open. But there on her shoulder, livid red against sickly white, was an oozing bite mark: not showing the prominent fangs of the dog, nor the single puncture of an insect sting, but a full bite from clearly human teeth. Blood continued to seep from it, running down her breast and side but there was pitifully little of it, as though she'd almost been drained to the last.

Her slumber was too deep to be broken, so Ryuko moved her back to the bed and sat beside her, hand on her sword ready to draw and strike. And as the first rays of dawn sunlight touched the paper panels, and fell across the bed, she saw the wound evaporate, the blood disappear, the skin return to sickly normality even as the estate began to stir around her and the noises of the early morning chores became apparent.

When Soroi appeared a few hours later with energizing, bitter tea and another portion of Mako's home-made delicacies, Ryuko quietly informed him that he should feed Satsuki as well as he could, while she returned home to fetch items she would require for the coming night. And for his part he chose not to question her grim countenance; it was a look of resigned determination that he had seen only once before, when his father had ridden out to battle alongside Satsuki's grandmother, an expedition from which only his armor and swords had returned.

## 鲜血 / Fresh Blood

Two swords: Kouyou, the katana with the red hilt, Aonagi, the companion sword with the blue. Hard wearing black clothes taken from the servants' quarters. Some strips of clean fabric to use as bandages, because it would be stupid to bleed to death from a wound she could have bound if she'd been better prepared. A small flask of rice wine. Ryuko laid the items out on the floor of her room – the manifest for what she had accepted was to be a one-way journey.

Isshin was asleep in the main chambers; she'd taken the good sake from the store and plied him with drink and then made him roar with laughter at her clumsy attempts at the elegant movements of *Jo-no-mai*. On another day he might have berated her that the money he was lavishing on training in music and dance had come to naught, but he seemed in good spirits and had been happy enough to listen when Ryuko had taken a shamisen and sung some of the songs from the villages to the west where the Matoi clan had originated. Finally, she'd seen his eyelids dip closed and as he'd begun to snore she'd carefully kissed him on the crown of the head, just as he'd done to her when she'd been a child, and then she'd taken his two swords from their stand and stealthily left the room.

The general hubbub of the day was decaying away, the few servants that her father still retained returning to their quarters for the evening. Ryuko dressed, swapping the fine silk of a noblewoman for the rough fabric of a laborer, then took the lump of charcoal she'd retrieved from the kitchen fires and began to apply it to her face and arms, breaking up the expanses of white skin. Scooping up the swords and other supplies, she took one last look at her room. She'd never become used to it, and she'd left the room of her childhood behind a long time ago; the nostalgia was for somewhere very distant now. With a final look at her past life, Ryuko slipped out into the passageway and onwards to the grounds.

She made her way quietly through the gardens, though there were few people these days to observe her passing, but when she came to the pear tree that was the secret route over the high walls she discovered Mikisugi there, leaning against it and smoking his slim pipe.

"As skillful as always, Ryuko-kun." He took the pipe from his mouth and tapped the contents out on the tree trunk, then recharged it with loose, fine tobacco from his pouch. "Still some things to learn, though. Still some things to learn."

He was unarmed, and Ryuko breathed a sigh of relief: most likely he was there to lecture rather than to make any serious attempt to impede her progress.

"Then blame the quality of my teachers. I don't have time to go the long way round."

He glanced across at her – the twin swords slung over her back, the dark, rough fabric of practical clothing, the face streaked black with charcoal.

"That looks like someone who has business with the Kiryuin family."

She ignored him and began to climb the trunk, hands and feet on familiar knots and branches.



“A man doesn’t usually take two swords to a lovers’ quarrel,” he called up.

“Then that only demonstrates that women take things more seriously.”

He looked at her as she climbed higher.

“If you need a way out, we could still become husband and wife,” but that was more an afterthought than a real suggestion.

She stopped for a moment and shot him a withering look.

“Nice offer. But you don’t have the figure for a wedding dress.”

A couple more branches and she would be onto the top of the wall itself.

“Have you thought about what happens to your father, to the rest of us?”

That stopped her in her tracks: the fear she’d been wrestling with all day. She opened her mouth to speak, to try to say something honest, free of her usual barbs, but how could she tell him that family, and the people she’d known and lived with her entire life, were unimportant, expendable even, compared to that one person lying in the distant house?

Mikisugi made things easy for her, and continued before she had a chance to respond.

“Forget it. I understand. It’s a tactical decision – a difficult, necessary, sacrifice to secure the objective.”

He lit the pipe, a tiny glow of orange light in the darkness, and drew in a deep breath.

“You’d have made a good general. I’d have been happy to follow you into battle.”

Ryuko straddled the wall and regained her breath – to drop down on the far side would be to commit herself to her plan.

“If you don’t come back, we’ll make sure that Mako-chan gets away safely. I’m not even sure she can read that note you left her.”

That lifted the last stone of doubt from her; Ryuko had worried that the letter would remain unread, the reason for the gold *koban* alongside it, a year’s worth of salary at least, opaque. So she’d set her affairs in order – now she could charge forwards into the ranks of the enemy without regret, just as her father would want her to.

“What do you want me to tell the old man, if we don’t ever see you again?”

Ryuko swung her leg over the wall, preparing to drop down.

“Tell him... I tried to be the son he always wanted to have.” And she pushed off into the darkness.

There was the thump of her landing, and the agitation of the long grasses as she sprinted away.

*Even down to saving the princess?* He shook his head. *Damn. I'm letting a kid go do an adult's work.*

He'd kick Kinagase out of bed and tell him to ready some horses, just in case.

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The thorns of the forest were longer at night, the roots more tortuous, the stones less sure. Haste was the enemy, but time was also against her. Strobing between the tree trunks Ryuko could see the torches of the mountainside shrine, and she kept up the pace, ignoring her aching legs and the fire in her lungs.

Minutes to reach the shrine. Minutes to descend the stone steps to the door. With each second that passed Ryuko imagined a drop of blood leaving Satsuki's body – the cheeks that had flashed red with anger and once or twice even with embarrassment now gone cold grey. Within the chamber at the base of the steps she hunted by torchlight for the little bowls that Satsuki had used. Could she ignore the wards, and gain some precious time? But it made no sense to have the plan that she did and not to think them important, so she continued the search until she finally found them, nestling amongst the rocks in the corner.

Water, wine and blood.

Wood, metal and stone.

The combination was easy enough to remember, but she had no idea whether the exact position, or ordering of the bowls in front of the door was critical, and for a moment she wished that she'd been sober when Satsuki had shown her the secret chamber. Hoping the spirits would be accommodating, Ryuko braced her back against it and with a low groan of exertion pushed the door open.

Within the passage she felt the subterranean breeze and heard the creaking of the loom in the distance, and with a few more steps she was there; she was standing before it. And that... was where the plan ran out. Ryuko held the torch aloft, trying to better understand the mass of metal and wood before her. Did you have to speak to it? Did it know what you wanted?

"I... I want you to weave me something!!"

Her voice echoed in the cavern, and she was momentarily chastened by how timorous it sounded.

"What do I give you as payment?"

She shouted, trying to appear bold, pushing her fears – fears for herself, fears for Satsuki – to the back of her mind.

"Hey! I said, what do you..."

## 「鮮血」

Ryuko rocked back on her heels for a moment. She'd *felt* the words, not heard them, but the meaning was clear enough.

“Fresh blood, eh?” The bloodstains on the rocks beneath her were clear and present in her mind. “Satsuki said as much.”

The cut on her palm had almost closed from when she'd set the wards, but she ran the edge of Aonagi over it again, wincing as the wound reopened. Then, keeping her free hand on the hilt of the sword, she stepped forward and squeezed out a thin trail of blood on the wooden beams at the front of the loom.

“Make me something to save Satsuki.”

She said it, and thought it, and waited.

Within the darkness, beyond the sanctuary of the little pool of light, the shuttles began to move.

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“Cloth, not clothes, Ryuko-chan,” her mother smiled, as she worked her hand loom.

Ryuko jerked awake at something that lay between dream and memory, and struggled to place herself. Lulled by the rhythmic sounds of the loom, she had slept for a moment, but beside her the torch was still burning, almost as full as before, so little time had been lost.

Cloth, not clothes. It was as much as she'd dared to hope for. As much as the rational part of her, the part that spoke in Satsuki's voice, had allowed her, even after seeing the attempt on Lady Ragyo's life. Ryuko imagined it: threads of such exceptional strength that when woven into a fabric they could turn aside even the sharpest blade. Such a thing would be valuable beyond measure: to confound the assassin, or allow one hundred men to triumph over ten thousand. Surely that was the secret of the Kiryuins, and that was all she had expected to come away with – a piece of fabric that at most could be worn as a cloak, the simplest of armor. Something for protection: skill and her swords would have to do the rest.

But her wildest expectations fell far short of what the loom seemed capable of. As the mechanism worked, wood of the rollers chirping, threads humming, its creation would sometimes come into view – first just a panel of dark cloth, but on each iteration detail and complexity added, a time-lapse in fabric. Sleeves, embroidery, a front and back somehow separated. And now as it came into view again, a red *obi* fastened to the waist, where previously there had been nothing. Ryuko could see there was work still to be done – loose threads of the red lining clearly visible at the cuffs and the hem. Incomplete then, but good enough. There was little point in waiting for it to be finished if she were just to find Satsuki dead. Then it would be no more than a fine vestment for *seppuku*. It would do. It would have to do.

The kimono came into view once again, and as the shuttles buzzed back and forth, Ryuko seized it, fighting for a moment with the mechanism before she felt energy surge in her arm and it came free: the exertion causing her to fling it into the darkness. The loom continued to work for a while, then slowly came to a rattling halt. Pins and needles cascaded through her arm, and in the distance the clothing crackled with blue light, like fur rubbed with amber, a pile of crumpled malevolence. She cast aside the rough servant's clothes and then, remembering the energy she'd felt when she touched the mysterious fabric, threw off her underclothes too and stood naked in the flickering torchlight. As though she were piercing the barrier of her doubts she stretched out an arm, and like a half-glimpsed reflection a black sleeve reached up from the ground to embrace her.

So the embers faded, from orange through to red, the last moments of their existence, as the straw fallen from the torch where she had passed twisted and blackened. And if you had placed your ear to the crack in the rock, where the massive stone door was almost, but not quite, perfectly closed, you might have felt a light breeze, like a sigh or the breath of a lover. On the floor blood, water and wine intermixed around the bowls where she had scattered them in her haste. And in the distant dark the loom began to chatter once again.

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To move at speed: that was one gift the offspring of the loom conferred on her. To move at speed, and seemingly without effort. Ryuko had traversed the passage to the surface in mere seconds, rather than the minutes taken for the descent, at one point careering off the wall as the speed of her ascent outstripped her ability to control her direction. Out here, in the forest, she could run untroubled – the slightest tension in her muscles sufficient to loft her above the treetops. The fabric of the kimono, of “Senketsu” as she'd come to think of it, was as resistant to the clawing branches as it had been to the keen edge of Aonagi or the heat of the torch when she had tested it. Her exposed feet and hands, however, were scattershot with cuts and grazes: Senketsu protected where it covered, and mere contact with the red lining imbued her with unnatural energy and stamina, but otherwise she was very much still mortal. Caution was still a necessity.

One final surge forward through the tall conifers and she found herself at the edge of the forest. Within the estate the pale mist was visible once again upon the lake, and it swirled around the somnolent forms of the guards resting on their spears, but as Ryuko crept closer she saw its tendrils twist away, as though unwilling to come into contact with her unnatural attire. Instead it parted around her, leaving the path clear and her mind equally unclouded: a further demonstration of the power of the loom.

The lights in Satsuki's quarters had been dimmed, but the panels to the lake-side were open, and when Ryuko entered she found only Soroi, sleeping in a side room, and the gentle curve of Bakuzan, untouched on its stand. Satsuki's absence provoked momentary desperation that settled finally into single-minded determination. She would find her, no matter the cost; if still alive, she would save her; if dead, she would have vengeance. The night would not end without yielding one outcome or the other.

The entire estate was frozen in the cold, crisp air of the autumn night, not even the guard dogs stirring as Ryuko passed. But in the main wing, the intricate structure that housed Lady Ragyo's apartments, lights were flickering, and she would sometimes glimpse movement – a shadow, or something less welcoming – within. Her entry was unchallenged: there were no guards at the doors, for only a fool would trespass in the very citadel of the Kiryuins. As she traversed the seemingly endless passageways, Ryuko passed the armor that Satsuki's grandmother had worn in battle, the mask and helmet more terrifying than any *oni* in the folk tales her mother had recited to her; it was surprisingly small, she realized, but its aspect no less terrifying for all that. And there was light, warm, golden light at the center of the complex; if Satsuki was anywhere, she would surely be there. Ryuko turned, and turned again, each time moving closer to the center it seemed, until there was one final turn... and she found herself facing the ancient armor once again.

The building was resisting her, confusing her, trying to guard its secrets, putting barriers between her and Satsuki. She felt despair rise for a moment, but closed her eyes, relaxed her shoulders and composed herself to the rhythm of her beating heart. And as she listened, she became aware of something else, in slight syncopation, the beating of a distant drum: the heartbeat that was always somewhat slower than hers: more measured, more calm. The heartbeat that quickened in battle, and sometimes, very sometimes, in an embrace. Ryuko turned, eyes clamped shut, tilting her head slightly, divining the source. She felt a panel in front of her, and slid it open, taking one step forward and then another. Turn by turn she traced a path forward in the darkness behind her eyelids; there were stairs, which she stumbled at when first encountered, and long straight passageways where the only marker was the insistent beat in the distance, but finally the melody of Satsuki's continued existence became clear, distinct, and Ryuko smelt the subtle fragrance of lavender that she forever associated with her friend.

She opened her eyes: ahead of her double doors were open, the portal to a large, formal antechamber. Satsuki lay in the center of the room, hands clasped to her chest around a single white chrysanthemum: the only indication of life the quiet, rhythmic beat that Ryuko could still hear. Beyond her were a further pair of doors, but these were almost closed, permitting only the barest glimpse beyond. Ryuko knelt, and placed a hand on Satsuki's chest, feeling the subtle rise and fall; there was no sign of injury: no blood, no bite marks. She was at least no worse, if no better, than she had been when Ryuko had left her earlier in the day.

The closed doors beyond were enticing in their simplicity, and the urge for confrontation made her palms itch, desperate to draw her swords. Satsuki, though, was her highest priority, and while she slept – the unnatural slumber that had overtaken all inside the estate – she was still at risk; to battle with her present would be to invite disaster. So Ryuko lifted her gently, marveling at the ease with which she could now be carried, and returned to the corridor.

*You're spiriting away your bride.* The thought made Ryuko smile for a moment, but the dark wood floors, and featureless paper panels, offered no obvious hiding-place – the golden light, and the endless luminance of the lamps soon became more oppressive, more hostile, than the shadows of the forest in the depths of a winter night. The thought of the forest, however, stirred precious memories of a spring afternoon within her, and she found herself examining the walls, seeking an opening of any kind. Eventually the passages gave up one of their secrets: a small store room scarcely more than one tatami mat in size, half full of boxes and

blankets and a large bucket of water ready for the chores of the day to come. Ryuko pulled a blanket out onto the floor, then positioned Satsuki upon it carefully in the corner, doing her best to obscure her presence with the larger items around her.

Perhaps it was only the light, but removed from the antechamber Satsuki's color had returned, in part at least, and her sleep seemed more natural. Ryuko knelt next to her – it would be so easy to steal a kiss, a tiny theft that forever would be unobserved – but as she moved closer she felt the draw of the room beyond where she had found her, with its secrets so nearly revealed, and instead of a kiss she merely touched her forehead to Satsuki's and closed her eyes for a moment.

“Don't go making trouble while I'm gone.”

Then she rose and pushed the remaining boxes into place, so that to a cursory inspection, at least, the room would seem unoccupied, and slid the panel closed.

Beyond the antechamber, beyond the double doors with their enticing opening, was only darkness. Light pooled at the entrance like spilt milk as Ryuko juggled sword and lamp, struggling to slide the doors fully open and enter the inner sanctum. This second chamber was larger, the walls invisible in shadows to her sides, but a further pair of doors were visible, opposite where she entered, sealed tight against curiosity. In the center of the room, a barrow mound of fabric: white cloth become grey in the dim illumination from the room she'd left. Backlit by the antechamber, Ryuko cast a long shadow across the mound, her silhouette a premonition of coming destruction.

It was clear, the right path was clear ahead of her, like the Nakasendo trail as it wound down from the mountains between Edo and Kyoto. Approach with stealth. Take no chances. Thrust the sword multiple times into the motionless bundle, with the full force of Senketsu behind her. Reclaim Satsuki and flee.

That clear route was only an illusion, though; Satsuki's voice sounded caution within her, caution that no matter how tempting the concept, Lady Ragyo would never sleep in a room such as this, bundled chaotically in those sheets. Far more likely then, that it was another sacrifice to be consumed or already drained: perhaps even the servant girl, Furi, whose disappearance had provoked the assassination attempt. A blind strike could not be countenanced when her sword might pierce an innocent.

So she moved closer, trying to walk with the measured steps of *nuki ashi* that Kinagase had taught her, and which she'd so successfully employed on night raids to the kitchens. Reluctant to touch it directly, she instead skewered the corner of the covers with her sword, and then Ryuko drew it slowly towards herself, revealing the object that had been hidden beneath.

It was a young woman, naked and back towards Ryuko, skin as pale and perfect as Lady Ragyo's own. Her hair, though, was long, great lengths of it down to her waist and golden like the threads the seamstresses used to embellish the more exquisite tapestries, and her skin glistened with sweat, or something indistinguishable. Disturbed by the removal of her coverings, the girl rolled over; she was pretty, Ryuko's age or slightly younger, but her left eye was sealed closed – either an accident of birth or an injury of some severity. And there,

emerging from her belly, was a cord of red silk, still slick with the waters of childbirth, which twisted and undulated like a serpent.

For a single moment, horror got the better of Ryuko and she stepped back clumsily, floorboards creaking an alarm beneath her. The strange girl opened her eye, fixing Ryuko with a glare of baleful hostility, and then opened her mouth in a silent roar of anger or warning, revealing perfectly triangular teeth, like the bleached jaws of the sharks that sometimes washed up on the southern coasts.

Ryuko cast down the lamp, grasping her sword with both hands, and as the oil spilled out it ignited on the cotton wick, sending a burning wave over the creature and her covers. The sheet caught fire quickly – in a moment flames leaping almost the height of the room – but so too did the girl, her skin bursting into flame with all the speed of paper or fabric thrown onto a bonfire. And as she burnt, she unraveled, her arms and legs coming apart from the hands and feet towards her core; she rolled furiously on the ground, the mouth locked all the while in the same strange, silent scream, and as she did so she cast off fragments of burning fabric that ignited the paper panels of the walls. Within seconds even the thick cedar-wood posts and beams, dense with antiquity, were smoking and creaking in the fire. And still the creature struggled, even as she disintegrated, until finally, in pity or simply unable to endure the spectacle any longer, Ryuko braved the flames, stepped forward, and delivered a single strike that split her in two, diagonally across the torso, from shoulder to waist. All remaining integrity lost, the girl disintegrated into a mass of fibers and patchwork, smoldering pieces circling the room on the up-draft of the flames.

“Poor Nui-chan, to have her light snuffed out while still not fully formed.”

Ryuko stepped back. A wall of fire, flames licking at the ceiling, separated her from the back of the room now, but through the rippling veil of reds and yellows she could see that the inner doors had been opened, and a figure, tall and composed, was framed in the doorway. It was difficult to see through the blaze, but the right arm was tilted at an angle that suggested a ready sword and...

A single flick of the wrist set the blade through the flames, flinging an arc of burning fragments directly at Ryuko's head, and as she raised an arm to shield her face the figure leapt through the inferno, clearing the full length of the room in an instant, and bringing its sword down onto Ryuko's shoulder in a perfect cut. Ryuko saw the end of her life in a single, crystalline instant within the blurred passage of the blade, and then she ricocheted into the antechamber, the path of the sword against the unyielding surface of Senketsu imparting a sudden, unexpected impulse backwards. For a moment her assailant seemed, if not surprised, then at least bemused.

“So – you too have availed yourself of the services of the loom.”

Lady Ragyo laughed, but it had the hollowness of someone who had left behind any care for humanity in the long distant past.

“Better you had been our daughter than Satsuki,” she whispered, fixing Ryuko once again with the unwavering stare of a viper. “But you turned her heart against our traditions, against us. She will not succeed us now.”

She advanced on Ryuko, sword ready.

“So we asked for another child, and the loom gave us a little doll woven from fine, red threads that we placed within ourselves, to become the perfect offspring of the Kiryuin house and the Seimei Loom.”

Lady Ragyo flashed forward again, her speed beyond human, but this time Ryuko was prepared; she let her limbs accelerate with every ounce of urgency that Senketsu could provide, and deflected the strike away to the side.

“You took one daughter away from us, dear Ryuko-sama. And now you have the temerity to rob us of another. For this, your life shall be forfeit twice over.”

The blows came with hurricane force, an endless whirlwind of metal that Ryuko struggled to parry or avoid. In each strike she saw the familiar shapes of her duels with Satsuki, the particular techniques of the sword-school of the Kiryuins, but there was no time now to consider drawing Aonagi and adopting the patterns that she'd ceaselessly repeated over the preceding months. Even with the power of Senketsu reinforcing her, it was as much as she could do to block the incoming attacks with two hands on the red-bound hilt of Kouyou. Another attack – a vertical stroke that met her sword with all the force of a mountain landslide – and Ryuko's muscles tensed until it seemed her tendons would snap. Still the pressure came, Lady Ragyo forcing the sword down upon her, and Ryuko felt the boards beneath her begin to flex and splinter. She pushed back, jumping clear, and Lady Ragyo completed the stroke, curving it round and slicing effortlessly through a foot-thick wooden support. The rafters above her began to creak, weakened by the spreading fire, but as they began to tumble towards her, and for a moment Ryuko entertained the merest glimmer of hope for an unexpected and beneficent intervention, Ragyo settled one foot backwards and shouted out a single *kiai* that shattered the beams around her leaving only a delicate rain of dust that evaporated as it touched the blinding whiteness of her kimono. She swept her sword around in a circle, as though in salutation.

“No matter; we shall let Satsuki regain her strength and she will mourn the loss of her beloved friend.” Lady Ragyo set her stance ready for another attack. “And then, and only then, we shall entreat the loom to make us another child. And perhaps we shall name her Ryuko, that Satsuki will love her better.”

Rage, mindless animal rage, filled Ryuko with strength and made Senketsu surge with energy. She leapt into the attack, turning Ragyo's own patterns against her, her muscles repeating the techniques that she'd barely survived a moment ago with apparent effortlessness. Her fury was making her careless, but a cut across the body and a sudden thrust to the abdomen all glanced harmlessly off Senketsu with no more effect than if Lady Ragyo had only been wielding a wooden training sword. Metal ground against metal as this time Ryuko bore down on Lady Ragyo, a fierce turn of Ryuko's wrist deflecting her and her sword off to the side, allowing Ryuko a first clear opening at Ragyo's head. She stepped forward, sensing victory, as the gap between Kouyou's cutting edge and the rainbow brilliance of Ragyo's hair closed in mere fractions of a second.

The sword came in horizontally at chest height, driven two-handed at Ryuko's right arm with a tyrant's ferocity. A momentary flash of incomprehension, why that was the target when



Senketsu would clearly halt the passage of the blade, and then understanding delivered in an instant as it struck, focused not to cut, but on the bone inside. Kouyou spiraled to the side as Ryuko's arm shattered, the force and sweep of the blow tossing her limply to the floor with as little effort as a puppeteer casting aside a puppet.

Lady Ragyo reached down and effortlessly lifted Ryuko up by the neck, heedless of the echoing scream as the shattered arm dangled under its own weight. Ryuko scrabbled with her left hand at the arm that was suspending her, struggling to prevent it from choking the life further from her.

"You father would be disappointed in you, dear Ryuko-sama. Did he not warn you that even the blunted edge can be deadly, if applied with sufficient force and skill?"

Lady Ragyo was amused: her breath scarcely quickened, not a hair displaced. The rainbow light dazzled, even against the backdrop of the rising fires.

"It seems you have yet to develop the talents the loom has bestowed upon you." The smile was a smirk now, full of thoughtless superiority. "But how could you? It has taken us ten years to gain mastery over what the loom delivered unto us. We, the head of a household steeped in the traditions of sorcery for more than a thousand years."

Ragyo pulled her captive close, tightening her grip and then running her tongue up Ryuko's neck, from collarbone to cheek.

"It will be a delight to consume you, Ryuko-sama, to strengthen our bond with the loom that it submits further to our will. Just as our beloved Soichiro was consumed. Just as your beloved mother was consumed."

Ragyo pushed Ryuko away slightly, the grip no less tight, readying her sword.

"It was inevitable. What could you, a mere child, offer to the loom that was of sufficient value that it balance the weight of Satsuki's life?"

Fingers of iron were squeezing the air from Ryuko's lungs. The whole right side of her body was ablaze with pain from her arm, incandescent white as the slightest motion made bone shift against broken bone. The color had gone from her face, now just a caricature of sweat-streaked black charcoal against pallid grey, but through teeth gritted so hard that she could hear them grinding one against another, she managed to gasp out two words.

"Only... myself..."

If the pain of the break had been more than she had ever thought imaginable, then it was still nothing compared to the agony as the fibers of Senketsu's lining had flowed like red waves, streaming into her body where broken bone had lanced through her muscles and skin. The indescribable feeling of bones being rearranged, muscles being knotted back together, of alien intent working within her body to restore it. She felt strength return, better yet a sudden surge of strength that was utterly beyond human, and she drew Aonagi in the space between her and her captor, driving the short sword up the unyielding surface of Ragyo's kimono, but then across her exposed neck, just above the white collar.

The head rolled to the side, mouth open in a half-uttered syllable. Lady Ragyo's body began to tilt backwards, pulling Ryuko with it, blood spraying outwards with an insistent beat, boiling as it hit the burning surfaces at the rear of the room. The hand that had held her captive so tightly released gently, almost a caress, and Ryuko was able to push herself clear, landing on her back near the doors, as the white-clad body came to rest in the center of the room, the epicenter of a viscous pool of dark crimson.

It was impossible, surely, that anyone could survive decapitation, even with sorcery or the power of the loom... But then it was equally impossible to give birth to a fully-grown woman, so the old certainties of reality were clearly knotted and twisted like tangled threads in Lady Ragyo's presence. Ryuko kept a respectable, wary distance between herself and the headless corpse, as she retrieved her katana, and then used the tip of the sword to flick open Ragyo's white kimono at the chest. The skin between her breasts was completely flawless, white like porcelain, and it began to glow red and yellow with incendiary reflection as the flames rushed up the walls, consuming the antechamber. But the body remained still, the mouth of the severed head still agape.

"Turn to dust." And Ryuko drove both her swords into Ragyo's chest, the blades crossing where the heart would be.

The head screamed, then, and continued to scream until the flames took it.

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Smoke was beginning to fill the corridor as Ryuko stumbled towards the secret storeroom where she had hidden Satsuki. As the rage of battle left her she felt her strength wane too, smoke choking her, her unprotected hands and feet blistering in the rising heat. Satsuki, at least, was where she had left her, undisturbed and sleeping oblivious of the inferno building around her. Ryuko pulled out a blanket and then upended the wash bucket over it, making sure it was fully soaked before wrapping it around Satsuki's prone form. Even in the chaos she permitted herself a little grin: Satsuki might emerge from this with a stinking head cold, but better than burnt alive. She'd bring her more pears while she recovered.

Satsuki hoist over one shoulder, Ryuko stumbled back out into the corridor, desperate to orientate herself amidst the spreading flames. Her head began to spin, and looking down she saw a bright splash of red across her chest, and down her arms; had Ragyo managed to connect with a strike after all? No matter – once outside there would be ample time to tend to her wounds. But there seemed to be no exit; passage after burning passage brought her back to the antechamber, the building seemingly intent on avenging its architect. Though Satsuki still slept she began to cough as she breathed in the billowing smoke, and Ryuko felt panic set in. She listened for a moment, desperate to hear something beyond the crash of collapsing structure and the crackle of the consuming fires. There, there beyond the end of the passageway, was the faintest hint of the cries of servants waking to find the estate ablaze.

She braced herself for an instant, then accelerated down the corridor, willing her aching legs to greater and greater speed, drawing one final time on the power within Senketsu. And at the

last she jumped, forwards and up, wrapping arms tight around Satsuki to protect her, crashing through the walls and out into empty space beyond. She felt the warmth of the blaze behind her, and the cool air of the early morning in front; above her a clear, dark blue sky revealed the stars and a waning moon, and she did what she could to orientate her fall as the ground rushed up to embrace her.

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In the end three, and only three, lost their lives in the blaze that destroyed the central buildings of the Kiryuin estate. As the servants had rushed to establish fire-breaks and prevent the flames from spreading to the other wings, some swore that they had seen Hououmaru run into the burning structure, heedless of attempts to stop her. And when the fire had finally burnt itself out, the ground had cooled, and the ashes had been raked over, the bones of two women were found in the midst of the smoldering embers; and so it seemed that she had perished attempting to save her mistress.

Isshin was gone too. He had arrived in the company of Mikisugi and Kinagase with a promptness that some subsequently found suspicious, and had rushed straight into the conflagration, calling out for Ryuko. But whether his intent was to save his daughter or stop her, none would ever know: the roof had collapsed minutes later, and he'd been crushed under one of the cross-beams, at least being spared death by fire or asphyxiation.

And, of course, Lady Ragyo's unborn child had also perished. It was thought strange that no sign of her was found, but the building had burned with exceptional fierceness and all assumed that the fine, fragile bones had simply been turned to ash.

Ryuko and Satsuki survived, however, and were found by Mako and Soroi, half-submerged in the ornamental lake, the waters lapping around their unconscious bodies. They were conveyed to Satsuki's quarters – those having escaped the worst of the fire – and there, attempts were made to nurse them both back to health. Satsuki was uninjured, in fact healthier than she had been before the blaze, all traces of the mystery ailment seemingly having been expunged by the smoke and flames. Ryuko, in contrast, had severe burns to her hands and feet that at least could be treated, but inexplicably worse was the lining of the strange black kimono that she wore, and its red fibers that pierced her skin and appeared to be growing into her. They'd blunted several good knives, and even a sword, attempting to cut the kimono away, and when, in desperation, they'd simply attempted to pull the clothing from her she'd cried out with such anguish – even though consciousness was still elusive – that Mako had made those present swear that no further attempt of that kind would be made.

Within a day Satsuki was walking again, albeit occasionally with Soroi's assistance, but Ryuko's condition worsened seemingly in direct proportion. On the first night delirium had caused her to call out for her friend, trying to find her or warn her, but by the following day Ryuko only remained still and silent, the red fibers covering more and more of her body with each passing hour.

Satsuki sat beside her friend, a perfect inversion of the arrangement of the days preceding the fire. She'd tried waving a little bowl of food that Mako had made under Ryuko's nose, but that had had no more effect than the rice wine, citrus fruits or lavender that she'd tried previously. In fact, it had only succeeded in making her hungry herself, and so she'd rested Ryuko's unresisting body against her, and had begun to eat, savoring the now familiar flavors of the *korokke* and the rice, slightly overcooked as always.

Figures were moving in the corridor, and from the silhouettes and rough voices it was clear that the visitors were Mikisugi and Kinagase. Satsuki had been uncertain whether it was prudent to show them Ryuko's current condition, but Mako had been insistent, and that and her own desperate desire for any path forward, however unlikely, had made her acquiesce. The voices were raised, agitated, and for a moment Satsuki's mood was clouded further by the possibility that they were arguing about who would inherit what little remained of the Matoi estate.

"Tell her."

"Let me tell you two useful pieces of information. One: Satsuki-sama has no reason to believe us, and two: my sister has no reason to help."

The argument continued for a while, sometimes frustratingly beyond the edge of audibility, and then the two shapes drew close to the doorway.

"Mikisugi-san. Kinagase-san. Please enter."

The panel slid open and the two men prostrated themselves.

"Satsuki-sama," Kinagase began and then stopped, seemingly unable to continue.

"Tell her," Mikisugi continued, contriving to elbow his colleague even while maintaining his bow.

"Ryuko-sama's condition... I have reason... I believe, that is, that my... sister Kinue may have some knowledge of it."

Satsuki stopped eating, the *hashi* halfway to her mouth, and replaced the quivering croquette back in her bowl.

"Sister? I was unaware you had any siblings, Kinagase-san."

"She was a *miko* at the Kyoto shrine to the great *onmyoji*, Abe no Seimei. But the Onmyo-ryo disapproved of her practices and had her banished – she now lives as a recluse in the mountains a day's ride from here."

"And why might she know of it?" Satsuki surveyed the two men with growing suspicion.

"I... can speak no further of it. But please, Satsuki-sama, if you value Ryuko-sama's life, and for the sake of our late master's love for her, go to my sister. Ask her for her help... say you come at my behest if need be."

Satsuki set the bowl down. A day's ride; that was all the time she had anyway, it seemed. Any longer and the red fibers would completely cover Ryuko, and she would be consumed.

"Then have the servants bring Junketsu from the stables."

Steam rose from the mare's flanks, and when she stamped the stones of the courtyard the sound pealed like thunder around the enclosing buildings. Of all the fine horses in the Kiryuin stables, Junketsu was the strongest, the most resilient and the fastest, but she was also the most ill-tempered and the most vengeful. Lady Ragyo alone had seemed to have struck a rapport with the beast – she had only to whisper in the horse's ear and it would become still and compliant, subservient to her every command. Satsuki, however, had impressed her will upon the horse by force, not by consensus, and when she rode her, she could ever feel rebellion, rippling in the muscles just below the surface, but it was better than nothing at all.

Satsuki checked the harness and supplies. She had Bakuzan and her bow, food and water sufficient for the journey and the return, but that was all. She'd debated taking armor, but speed was worth more to her than her own protection, and were anyone to cross her path with malice they would find that the gates of hell opened at her back.

She pulled herself up into the saddle. Behind her, Ryuko had been tied into place, fixed upright by a complex sequence of ropes and knots that Mako claimed to have been taught by Gamagoori. Face obscured by a broad bamboo hat, It gave the momentary appearance that Ryuko was simply asleep, and Mako had given solid assurance that should the horse fall then she could be released by a firm tug on the loose end of the rope. Satsuki dug her heels in, turning Junketsu towards the gates.

"Mikisugi-san. In my absence I place the good running of the estate in your hands." Satsuki fixed him with a look of some severity. "If you could see to it that it is still here on my return, I would be most grateful. Soro-i will be able to assist with any of the administrative tasks."

Mikisugi was taken aback momentarily at his sudden elevation in status, but composed himself sufficiently to manage a bow and a mumbled "Milady." Kinagase, however, stepped forward, wrestling with uncertainty.

"And there is nothing for me, Satsuki-sama?"

Satsuki looked down at him, regret for her earlier mocking words pooling in her heart.

"You will forever have my gratitude, Kinagase-san." She glanced back at the figure that seemed to slumber behind her. "But you understand that that is all that I am able to give you."

Kinagase bowed slightly, and then proffered an arm up to her. Satsuki reached down in turn, but when Kinagase took her hand, it wasn't the delicate touch of the nobles at court that so often infuriated her, but instead a firm grasp at the wrist as though she were to lift him up over a cliff edge, a mark of acknowledgement from one soldier to another.

"Clear roads and clear skies, Satsuki-sama. We will await your return, and the restoration of Ryuko-sama to good health."

And with one final look at the people around her, Satsuki set Junketsu at a gallop out of the gates and onto the road towards the mountains.

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The skies had opened, and it was nearly nightfall when Satsuki negotiated the pitted track that was the last section of the route up to Kinue's mountainside shack. During her passage through the dense forests on the lower slopes, she'd been stopped once, and only once, by bandits. For their trouble there was now a scattering of orphaned limbs across the roadway, broad pools of blood where once only puddles of clear water had stood, and one or two crushed skulls where Junketsu had seen fit to join the fray. Satsuki had let a fraction of the contingent live, those that had seemed least convinced of the wisdom of attacking her, and it seemed her plan had been a success: the message passed about widely and rapidly that the mysterious rider with her sleeping companion were not to be obstructed.

The clearing in which the shack lay was empty, quiet, but light from within the small house and smoke from a single chimney indicated that its owner was in residence. Satsuki dismounted, leading Junketsu closer on foot, and then tied the harness around the low branches of one of the ominously tall katsura that loomed over the shack.

"Kinue-sensei!" she called out, unsure of whether the address was suitably respectful.  
"Kinue-sensei!"

After a moment that stretched out seemingly for eternity, the door slid open and a figure appeared clad in the familiar red and white of a shrine maiden.

"It is uncommon to have visitors at so late an hour," the woman called back. "Who is it that has business with me?"

Satsuki bowed deeply.

"I am Kiryuin Satsuki, Kinue-sensei. I come at your brother's recommendation to beg your assistance in a matter of great importance to me."

Despite the distance that still separated them, at the mention of her name Satsuki felt Kinue's posture stiffen, and the air between them chilled, cold and colder still than the heavy rain.

"You are not welcome here, daughter of Kiryuin," Kinue responded, and turned to re-enter her home.

In the vanishing figure, Satsuki saw the vanishing of the last chance for Ryuko's recovery, and she slumped to her knees in the muddy puddles of the clearing, pressing her forehead to the ground amongst the fallen autumn leaves. Wet earth and rotting leaves: as she stretched out her arms in supplication, an obeisance she'd only been called on to make once before when the Shogun himself had visited their estate, she smelt a life in another world; a life without privilege, with little responsibility, where she and Ryuko would meet in the fields

after the harvest, and sit together under the orchard trees eating the freshly picked fruit. And at the thought of the potential of that lifetime evaporating, she had to choke back tears, instead just pressing her head further into the mud, and letting her hair fan out in the muddy water as thunder rolled above her.

“If you will not help me, Kinue-sensei,” she called out, “then at least take in my companion and treat her with all the skills at your command!”

Kinue stopped, and looked back at her, amused and slightly surprised.

“And what’s the importance of this girl, that she’d have a Kiryuin make soup from ditchwater?”

“She, she...” Satsuki stammered the words, feeling her heart thump in her chest. “She is... like a sister to me!” She choked as she spoke, on the half-truth that was still as much as she could bring herself to admit.

The lightning flashed again, thunder booming directly above them, and in the momentary arc-white light the clearing was perfectly illuminated, the red fibers flowing up Ryuko’s neck, and down onto her hands and feet, visible with pinpoint clarity as they searched and surged. At the sight, Kinue staggered against the thick wooden door frame. In the darkness that followed the flash, her face was ghost white – a Noh mask of horror.

“Bring her inside!” The antagonism was gone, every objection swept aside in that single moment of lucidity. There was only urgency now, a terrible unexplained urgency that seemed heavier than even Satsuki’s own fears.

Satsuki pulled Ryuko down off Junketsu and over her shoulder, her feet slipping on muddy rocks as she carried her into the shack. The interior was but a single, large room with a broad, low table that Kinue was clearing with great sweeps of her arms, seemingly untroubled by the wooden bowls and foodstuffs that she was scattering to the corners. As she did so, Satsuki observed patterns of intricate tattoos on her forearms, and with more scrutiny she saw they extended across the upper portion of her chest and up to the neck. Was she a convicted criminal, then? This woman who seemed so poised and assured? Was that why the Onmyo-ryo had banished her from the shrine, why Kinagase had been so reluctant to mention her and her skills?

Kinue looked down critically at Ryuko, as Satsuki laid her out on the table, her heart hammering in terror. Terror: there was no other word for it. *What have you done, child? What have you done?* It was the work of a moment to take in the unfinished hems and sleeves, the ragged edges with their insistently questioning red boundaries. She placed a hand across Ryuko’s forehead, and then put her ear to her mouth; there was life still there, but only barely. What sort of determination must this girl be carrying in her heart, that she’d resisted this long?

“What did your friend ask for, Satsuki-sama?”

“I... I don’t know. Something to protect me, I think.”

Despite her fear, Kinue managed a snort of derision.

“Protect *you*? What horror could be so profound that a woman of the Kiryuin line requires protection from it?”

Satsuki bowed her head, her voice painfully quiet.

“My mother... I think she wanted to save me from my mother.”

Kinue set her mouth in a thin, hard line. The kimono would have been dangerous enough had it been fully completed, a weapon of such power that no small ingenuity would have been required for its disposal, but in this unfinished state, with these live fibers still within it... She had only dealt with such once before, and then the quantity had been miniscule, a mere fraction of what was replicating, growing and spreading before her.

“And did she set the wards properly, and re-seal the loom?”

“I don’t know!” Satsuki began to clench and unclench her fists in frustration. “She always had a tendency for carelessness...”

Kinue placed a hand gently on Satsuki’s shoulder, and attempted a reassuring squeeze. *Now’s not the time to be pushing this one too hard.*

“Satsuki-sama, do you know why it is called the Seimei Loom?”

The question jolted Satsuki back to some measure of composure.

“Mother never spoke of it. But I had... I had always assumed it was named for your master, Abe no Seimei, just as the shrine in Kyoto was named.”

Memories of her own initiation into this strange world flooded back, Kinue remembering the scrolls her sensei had shown her, thousands upon countless thousands, every piece of human knowledge on the threat before her.

“You might think so, and it’s certainly true that your ancestors were careful not to disavow anyone of that idea,” she answered with a little mirthless smile. “But no, it is not for the great *onmyoji*. It is named for these: the Seimei Sen’i, the Living Fibers. It is not the loom that gives them power – it is they that give it life.”

She pulled down her *haori* over her shoulders, slipping her arms from the sleeves and revealing the full extent of her tattoos. Red ink ran in an unbroken design up her arms, and over her shoulders, chest and upper back, disappearing into the white bindings that formed her underclothes. There were dragons, phoenix, cranes taking flight, the great rolling waves of the tsunami, and mid-way between her shoulder blades a crest of a five-lobed persimmon flower. And as Satsuki watched, the tattoos began to move, the cranes beating their wings as they prepared for flight, the dragons writhing against one another, the spray boiling on the edges of the waves.

“It is the Seimei Sen’i that my sensei sewed into me, when she revealed the secrets of this hidden world. It is from them that I draw my power. And because of them that I choose



seclusion.”

The tattoos were glowing red with energy, a baleful, inhuman light that was almost hypnotic. Satsuki reached out a finger to touch a cat that was tensing, ready to pounce, and the animal recoiled up Kinue’s forearm, wary of her touch.

“Then can you not sew the fibers of the kimono into yourself too? Take command of them, as you do these tattoos?”

Kinue sighed, closing her eyes and shaking her head gently for a few moments.

“This is as much as my body will allow; I already waver too close to the boundary between the world of the living and world of the spirits. And what I have within me is but a fraction of what you see before us. But...”

Ryuko stirred slightly on the table, the red fibers rippling on her neck, now almost up to her ears. Against all expectation she’d almost gained control of the alien presence that enveloped her; if Satsuki were similarly resistant, strong-willed, and if she, Kinue, were to unite them both...

“Is your friend important to you, Satsuki-sama?”

Satsuki looked back at her with unwavering intensity.

“More than life.”

It began with a question, just as it always began with a question, just as it had begun for Kinue with a question when the elderly woman had taken her to one side at the Kyoto shrine when she had been a child.

“More so than that?”

Satsuki looked confused for a moment.

*I’m sorry, Satsuki-sama. I’m asking you to commit to a plan that neither of us can know the outcome of.*

“Is she important enough to you that to save her you would accept separation from her forever? Not just in this life, but in all lives?”

There was still a little pride left in her, even in the overwhelming presence of the supernatural horror before them, and Satsuki glared at Kinue.

“No matter the distance between us, I will always find her.”

“It won’t be distance that separates you, Satsuki-sama.”

Satsuki continued to glare, her silence voicing her commitment to the unknown plan.

“Very well. The Seimei Sen’i seek living hosts, where they can grow until all the world can be transformed as they are. Your friend is barely holding them in check, Satsuki-sama, and we must seal them away within you before they grow beyond her ability to control. I will act as the medium, but the two of you must bear the burden between you.”

But Satsuki was already pulling off her clothes, revealing her white skin, and preparing herself for the unknown task ahead.

“But be warned: there is energy here beyond any understanding. When we are finished, the world you return to may be very different to this one.”

Kinue felt the chill of the premonition: that no matter what the outcome of their attempt she would not be a part of that future.

*I’m sorry, Tsumugu. I don’t think this world has a place for me anymore. You won’t understand, will you, why I’ve woven my life so tightly into the fates of these two young women. Don’t be too hard on them. Don’t deny the possibility of coexistence with the fibers, monstrous though you find them. And I’m sorry I never thanked you for the fresh eggs and milk you left for me when you last visited. I don’t think I’ll have the chance to thank you now, will I?*

Kinue shook off the distracting reverie, and prepared herself.

“If you have anything to say to your friend, Satsuki-sama, you may not have another chance...”

Satsuki looked down at Ryuko; the red waves had almost completely submerged her now, rolling over her chest and legs, lapping gently at her chin, almost a sea of blood. She brushed aside the unruly black fringe, remembering the urchin boy that had stood in the midst of the ornamental lake, uncountable lifetimes ago. Then she leant forward and let her lips brush against Ryuko’s: the ghost of a ghost, of a ghost, of a kiss.

“Forgive me, Ryuko,” she whispered.

Then she grasped Ryuko’s hand firmly, settled herself on the wooden table, and lay down next to her friend. Beneath her, the waxed surface spoke in silent volumes of ten thousand meals taken in solitude.

“You may begin, Kinue-sensei.” She was surprised at the sound of her own voice: strangely composed, free of fear.

Reaching into her hair, Kinue pulled out a long needle of rough black iron.

“A star fell to earth, countless years ago. This needle was made from the metal they found within it, among other things.”

She pulled at one of the strands on the hem of Senketsu, selecting the longest she could find as it waved like tall grasses in the wind. As she brought up the needle it twisted in her

fingers, seemingly unwilling to come into contact with it, but she forced it roughly through the eye and then tied it off in a firm knot.

“Did your mother ever speak to you of the pain of childbirth, Satsuki-sama?”

If Satsuki was surprised at this final question, she gave no sign of it, merely squeezing Ryuko’s hand tighter.

“It was not a subject deemed fit for conversation, Kinue-sensei. However the women of the kitchens were... enlightening, shall we say, with their broad knowledge.”

Kinue took a final look at the two girls laid out on the table before her. She could feel the fibers in her own body resisting, attempting to rebel at the path of doubtless self-destruction that she was about to pursue, but she impressed her will upon them, drawing their power to the surface.

“This will be considerably more painful, I should imagine. After all – you will be giving birth to a new world.”

Then she raised the needle up, bringing it down forcefully in an arc that drove through Satsuki’s sternum and heart in a single, faultless motion, drawing the red fiber with it.

That first thread was a bolt of lightning that flowed out from her heart through every artery and vein, burning as it went, a mixture of agony and ecstasy that set her body rigid. But with the second and third threads, and those that came after, Satsuki found Ryuko’s motionless body in the depths of the crimson ocean, and slowly began to pull her towards the surface.

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“...tsuki-sama... Satsuki-sama...”

The voice was familiar and insistent, just on the boundary between sleep and wakefulness. Blue and red threads on soft white fabric, the pattern of interlocking dragons on her quilt. The single thread of red that had come loose, that she sometimes twisted between her fingers before she slept. She touched her palm to her chest, and felt... nothing. Beneath her clothing there was no scar, no pain, no zig-zag of scarlet running from her neck to her groin, and her memories fought briefly with the new reality. The light was bright, suggesting mid-morning, and as it played off the watercolors of cranes on the wood-framed panels, for a moment the birds appeared to take flight. She closed her eyes again; she must just have nodded off...

The chant from outside the room continued.

Opening her eyes, she pushed herself up, finding herself dressed in the fine white silk of her most formal kimono. She struggled to remember – was there some function to attend today? An audience with the Shogun, to mourn her late parents?

“Mankanshoku - enter.”

The door slid to the side, and the young maid approached, bowing deeply. As unexpected as her stiffly correct entrance was her formal attire – clearly an engagement of some significance was underway.

“Satsuki-sama... A rider from the Sanageyama family has arrived. The marriage party will be with us within the hour.”

Was she still asleep, still dreaming? Satsuki felt her head spin.

“Marriage? But I’m not getting married...”

Mako bowed deeper still in embarrassment, her forehead touching the floor.

“Your sister’s wedding, Satsuki-sama. Ryuko-sama’s wedding.”

Mako looked up, and Satsuki saw brown eyes brimming with tears. The deluge was following close behind.

“She looks so beautiful in her wedding dress.”

*It'll not be distance that separates you, Satsuki-sama.*

Kinue’s words resonated within her, amplified by the hollowness that grew moment by moment. Satsuki placed a trembling hand on Mako's shoulder to steady herself, and the maid bowed again, uncertain whether it was reassurance or disapproval.

“You have duties to perform today?” She let her hand drop to Mako's own as she nodded, and squeezed gently. “I’m sure you will discharge them commendably. And Ryuko-sama...?”

“Being attended in the North wing, Satsuki-sama.”

“Of course. Thank you, Mankanshoku. You may go.”

Mako slipped carefully out of the room, and Satsuki waited for a moment as her footsteps disappeared down the corridor. Then she took her sandals in hand, pulled open the door and, hitching her kimono up above her knees in a highly unconventional style, sprinted out, turning towards the servant’s quarters rather than the well-trodden route through the grounds. She charged through the wedding preparations and kitchens at full speed, scattering maids and servants as she went, resorting once again to the short-cut that she had used as a child. For a moment she saw a mountainous blur that could only have been Gamagoori, but he scarcely had a moment to begin a bow before she was past him and out into the grounds, hair streaming behind her like her standard, a pennant lustrous in black, running through the wilder grasses at the rear of the building, and feeling the fine stones of the pathways beneath her feet. She kept going when she reached the North wing, dropping her *geta* at the entrance and letting her kimono slip down only at the last possible moment, as she ran into the room where a young woman was being dressed by a score of fussing attendants. Sweeping her into an embrace, Satsuki pulled her close, murmuring a strange litany that was inaudible to all save Ryuko herself:

“You're here. You're here. You're here.”

Ryuko let out a sort of strangled gurgle, as Satsuki's arms tightened around her.

"Onee-sama... you're crushing my dress."

Satsuki relented for a moment, stepping back to appraise her, and registering for the first time the shocked looks on the faces of the maids.

"I wish to speak with my...", she hesitated as the word died in her throat, "with Ryuko-sama for a moment. Leave us."

The troupe bowed and left. There was bound to be chatter among them later – she would have to have Gamagoori speak to them.

Embarrassment was showing on Ryuko's face, an endearing coyness that Satsuki could not recall ever having seen before.

"I know you worry, onee-sama, but I wasn't going to be late for my own wedding."

Satsuki could feel the emotions of her other self, the Satsuki of this world, like a view of a landscape through rice paper: the scale and shape were clear, even if the details were lacking. There was a faded melancholy that her sister was leaving home, but it blended smoothly into the warmth of happiness that she'd found love and would be looked after, and hopefully kept out of trouble. But entirely absent was the intensity that marked Satsuki's own feelings, the searing whiteness and abyssal blackness. The feelings of Satsuki-the-sister were just a portrait in pastel watercolors, not black ink-work on pristine white board that was so harsh that the surface had been torn ragged by the strokes.

The wedding dress had been creased by the sudden embrace, and Satsuki found herself undoing the damage she'd wrought, smoothing it out and adjusting it with a degree of attention the maids could only aspire to. The outermost layer was truly beautiful, embellished with phoenix patterns in golden threads, but the red background they were woven into was disquieting. Satsuki ran her hand over it, expecting any moment to feel the fibers shudder and shift under her fingers; she could still see Ryuko struggling at the boundary of a sea of red, only her head above water now as the fibers flowed around her. Did she really not remember anything? Or had the Seimei Sen'i dragged her down with them and this girl, standing in the room with her, so familiar and so very, very different, was all that was left?

"And how do you feel?" Satsuki tried to make the question innocuous, just a natural component of the conversation, just the normal concern of a sister that nothing spoil this special day.

Ryuko looked uncertain for a moment.

"Reckon this is going to work out, ne-san?"

*I could take Junketsu from the stables.*

"Not too late for us to change places." Satsuki smiled as warmly as she could, hoping that the comment would sound flippant, little more than a verbal counterpart to their sparring.

*I could take a horse and we could ride from here.*

“Hah! You know that idiot monkey said he wouldn’t deem himself worthy of asking for either of our hands until he could beat us in a fair fight. And he never did beat you.”

*We could make it to the Dutch trading post in Hirado in three days. Ahead of any message.*

“But you let him beat you that one time, didn’t you? So there’s something there, and that should be sufficient.” Unwelcome knowledge was seeping into Satsuki, a history of the simple, shared pleasures of siblings. But it wasn’t enough; it wasn’t enough to have the memories, but not to have the future together.

*Buy passage on a ship to somewhere far away from here. China perhaps. India, or maybe even Europe.*

“Sufficient for a lifetime? Sufficient for happiness?”

Satsuki felt a sudden terrible weight of understanding.

*But she doesn’t want that, does she?*

“You could make anyone happy, Ryuko.” And then, in the hopes that the statement would not be subject to more careful analysis, “Now, let me make sure you’re presentable. Hands.”

Ryuko straightened herself up, like a child appearing before her tutors, and held out both hands. The nails were bitten down, her habit unbroken, but Satsuki noted with relief that Ryuko had at least cleaned underneath them. Her hair was as stubbornly rebellious as always, though, but the maids had done what they could with it. It was really quite respectable, and... Satsuki ran her fingers through a fringe of bright red, feeling her fingertips tingle slightly as she did so, and frowned.

“How long have you had this...?”

Pursed lips indicated that the question was not to Ryuko’s liking.

“Only forever, you idiot. Did you crack that thick skull of yours on something on the way over?”

Even weighed by the complexities of the wedding dress, Ryuko could move quickly. The punch began to form, a short throw uppercut to the stomach, and Satsuki felt her body react instinctively in response. And as she did so she recognized it for what it was: it was Ryuko’s punch, *her* Ryuko’s punch, as familiar as surly child standing in a lake, or a message hidden within the heart of a peach, or gentle hands running up her legs in the subterranean darkness. So she let it connect, tensing only sufficiently to take the edge off, and doubled up appropriately.

“Hey, Satsuki... you OK?” There was honest concern in Ryuko’s voice, and she put her arm around her sister and helped her to straighten up. “That doesn’t normally catch you out.”

Satsuki's cheeks were wet, but whether her eyes were watering from the blow, or from something else, it was impossible for Ryuko to tell.

"It seems you've surpassed your sensei at last... that's good... that's good..."

It was easy to convince herself that the ache in her stomach was just from the punch and not a creeping malaise spreading outwards from her heart. And it was easier still just to give up, to let her body run itself and fall back into the patterns of sisterly behavior that it must have learnt over a lifetime. She saw herself fussing over Ryuko in a way she would never have imagined possible, and delivering the words of advice she'd composed for the daughter she believed she'd never have:

"Make sure that the maids air the mattresses every day, otherwise you'll get lice."

"Attend dinners with your ears open, but chew with your mouth closed."

"And don't forget he's just a man, with a man's fragile ego. Be sure to let him beat you once in a while when you spar with him."

"One time in five?" Pride was jostling with practicality, and Ryuko was unsure where the balance point ought to be found.

Satsuki reflected for a moment.

"One time in ten should be sufficient."

She was running out of time. She'd made a perfect bubble for the two of them in which the seconds no longer passed, where the sand was frozen in the hourglass, each grain like a comet in stasis, but outside it the clouds were still moving, the sun still rising, the wedding party still approaching. The maids would soon be returning; it was a last chance to bring something forward from the old, crumbling world into this new one.

"I feel I should give you a wedding gift." Satsuki's mind raced as she tried to find something with value that she could give; something with special meaning for them both. "I have Bakuzan. You should take Grandfather's swords, the pair he left father: one with the red silk hilt, one with the blue."

There was a smile there, but Ryuko was abashed, and looked down guiltily.

"Thanks... but... I already took them."

Satsuki smiled in turn and pulled the white hood up over her sister's head.

"That... is as I expected. You haven't changed, I see. Don't ever change."

Ryuko squeezed her sister – gently so as not to disturb her wedding dress, but still firmly and full of emotion.

"Thanks, ne-san. Love ya! Be sure you come and visit us, and bring Soroi with you. There are mountain walks the two of you would like."

Satsuki felt Ryuko's hair on her cheek, and smelt the familiar scent: sweat, barley and citrus. So, she was her Ryuko after all... She forced herself to speak, even as her throat tightened and her heart turned to stone and sank beneath the water's surface, leaving only ripples.

"I love you, Ryuko."

It was the first time she'd spoken those words aloud.



## Epilogue

Satsuki slipped a perfectly manicured nail under the frail, yellowing page, and turned to the next story. The book, “The Funerary Flower-Wreath, and other unknown folk-tales” was an English translation of a German text, published more than one hundred years ago. Soroi had found it for her after her father’s death, and had read to her from it whenever she couldn’t sleep. He’d been selective in what he had chosen for Satsuki when she was little, but in time she’d taken ownership of the book herself and had thrilled at the violence and ached at the passion of the stories which at the time he’d deemed too adult for her.

It was strange to read about the history of your own family in a book of legends, but though the description of the underground vault bore clear resemblance to the chamber in which the Original Life Fiber had lain dormant, there was no sign that the Seimei Loom had ever existed. Even so, it hadn’t taken long for Satsuki to begin the process of substituting names for those in the story: hers for Ane, the elder daughter, Ragyo for Shio the sorceress mother, and so on.

But she’d never found the right name for Yoshioka Kiku, the brawling tomboy that had won Ane’s heart, and then been lost to her forever. She’d worked her way through lists of names, looking for the resonance that would bring her to life: Yui, Hina, Koharu. Hinata, Yuna, Sei. The names her parents might have given to her nameless sister. She’d even tried “Nonon” once, but although it had lent a thrill to certain passages, it was difficult to imagine her friend as a sister, and perhaps harder still to imagine her as rough and uncultured as Kiku was supposed to have been.

Head on Satsuki’s lap, Ryuko lay sleeping, feet stuck out over the arm of the couch and one toe peeking rebelliously from a worn pair of cotton socks. She was whistling slightly, the quiet whistling snore that was more piercing than Nonon’s marching band at full volume, and she’d managed to drool slightly on Satsuki’s skirt, leaving a damp, chilling patch on her thigh. As usual she’d drifted off with her 3DS clamped rigidly in her hand – even though her arm was jutting out at a surprising, contorted angle – which Satsuki supposed was a talent of sorts; if she died in her sleep they’d probably have to break her fingers to free it.

Ryuko was the right name, it was obvious now. Matoi Ryuko. Satsuki gently placed the book down on the couch and looked at her sister: the singular red and black hair, a formless t-shirt that had been washed so many times that the print on it might as well have been the hieroglyphs of an alien civilization, tight jeans on slim but muscular legs.

*For eighteen years I thought you’d gone on ahead of me.*

Ever so delicately, Satsuki brushed the red fringe away from Ryuko’s eyes, savoring the familiar tingle as she did so; stirring nostalgic recollections of the last time she’d worn Junketsu.

*There was no terror in death when I thought it to be the fastest way to be reunited with you. No matter what I had to endure, every second of it was a second closer to seeing you again.*

She could see an ear, remarkably delicate beneath the black hair.

*I never gave any thought to what would happen if I survived. I had a plan for a glorious death. But I know nothing of how to live an unremarkable life.*

Moving slowly and deliberately that she not wake her sister, Satsuki leant down and whispered,

“Thank you; thank you for saving me...”

It was a ridiculous, irresistible concept: something far from in keeping with the thoughts of a hardened realist. But she could ask herself, at least, even if she'd never ask another; ask whether they had done enough, suffered enough, given enough, in this life to break the curse of the Seimei Loom. That they could be together in their next incarnations. They might only be separated by a single lifetime now: that wasn't so long in the scheme of things, was it?

Ryuko shifted in her sleep to a more comfortable position and mumbled,

“...’s OK Sis... ’s peaches in ... fridge if ...’re hungry...”

Ryuko had turned herself face upwards now, head resting on Satsuki's leg like a pillow, her mouth slightly open, and Satsuki found herself perilously close to her. She hesitated, feeling an unfamiliar tension in her muscles. She could just pull back or... if she moved slightly forwards their lips would brush, just as Ane had kissed Kiku as she lay trapped within the Seimei Sen'i. Time slowed to a stop, like a river backed up against a dam, as she wrestled with the unfamiliar dilemma.

But she could always read the story again tomorrow.

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*Like Michinoku  
Cloth, printed with tangled ferns,  
My mind is disordered  
Because of you,  
But my love is not.*

- Minamoto no Tōru

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